

Constrained contexts, resilient teachers: instructional adaptation, student engagement, and professional well-being

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ABSTRACT

Filipino secondary teachers face significant challenges in constrained educational contexts, including limited resources, rigid curricula, and systemic pressures that affect instructional quality and student engagement. This study explored how teachers navigate these constraints, adapt instruction, and maintain professional well-being. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, involving fifteen purposively selected teachers who met criteria of active teaching and willingness to participate. Data were collected using validated open-ended guide questions and analyzed through Colaizzi's framework to identify recurring patterns and themes. Findings revealed five interconnected themes: normalization of instructional compromise, limited opportunities for pedagogical innovation, teacher morale vulnerability, student compliance over genuine engagement, and resilience-driven teaching culture. These results indicate that systemic constraints shape instructional practices, often prioritizing syllabus completion over mastery, and influence student engagement through extrinsic motivation. Despite these challenges, teachers exhibited resilience through adaptability, improvisation, and commitment, sustaining both instructional continuity and personal well-being. The study underscores the critical role of teacher agency, morale, and resilience in navigating structural limitations, offering insights into professional adaptation and the complex dynamics of teaching in constrained educational environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is widely recognized as a complex and multifaceted professional practice that demands both intellectual engagement and emotional resilience [1]. Educators navigate a variety of systemic, institutional, and social pressures while striving to maintain instructional quality, balance curriculum requirements, and meet the diverse needs of students [2]. In constrained educational environments, teachers often face limited resources, rigid policies, and heavy workloads, which necessitate adaptive strategies to sustain both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes [3]. Instructional adaptation extends beyond lesson delivery to include classroom management, assessment practices, and student engagement strategies, reflecting the dynamic and intricate nature of teaching [4].

In the Philippine education system, teachers confront a range of pressing challenges that compromise instructional quality and limit pedagogical autonomy [5]. These include large class sizes, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient institutional support, all of which place considerable strain on teachers' ability to implement effective teaching strategies [6]. Compounding these challenges are rigid curricula and high-stakes assessment practices that prioritize content completion and standardization over critical thinking and meaningful student engagement [7]. Teachers are frequently expected to assume multiple non-instructional roles, including administrative duties, counseling responsibilities, and extracurricular supervision, further stretching professional capacities and increasing occupational stress [8]. The cumulative effect of these systemic and institutional pressures creates an environment in which teacher adaptation, resilience, and morale are critical determinants of educational outcomes and professional sustainability [9].

Globally, research on teaching in constrained contexts has highlighted the critical role of instructional adaptation and teacher resilience in sustaining professional practice [10]. Teachers often adopt pragmatic strategies to balance curricular requirements with classroom realities, demonstrating flexibility in lesson planning, assessment approaches, and classroom management [11]. Additionally, studies have shown that teacher morale and engagement are closely linked to the availability of institutional support, professional recognition, and access to pedagogical resources, emphasizing the interplay between structural conditions and professional agency [12]. Within these constrained contexts, student engagement often reflects extrinsic motivations such as grades and attendance rather than intrinsic interest, highlighting the systemic influences on learning behaviors [13]. These underscore the complex nature of teaching in resource-limited environments, where the interplay of systemic pressures, professional agency, and student dynamics shapes educational experiences [14].

Despite the growing body of research, there remains insufficient empirical evidence on how Filipino secondary teachers specifically navigate instructional compromises, foster student engagement, and sustain professional well-being in the face of persistent systemic constraints. Few studies have captured the nuanced, lived experiences of teachers in Philippine classrooms, particularly the strategies they employ to adapt instruction, engage students, and maintain their own professional and emotional health. This study seeks to fill this gap by addressing the general research question: how do teachers in constrained educational contexts adapt instruction, engage students, and maintain professional well-being? The overarching purpose of this research is to explore and analyze teachers' lived experiences, shedding light on the complex dynamics of professional practice under challenging conditions.

The significance of this study extends to multiple stakeholders. For participating teachers, it provides an opportunity for reflective articulation of their experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies. For the broader academic community, it contributes to the growing literature on teacher resilience, instructional adaptation, and professional well-being in constrained contexts, enriching understanding of how systemic factors shape pedagogical practice. Furthermore, this research offers insights into the broader discourse on education in resource-limited environments, providing empirical evidence that can inform policy considerations, professional development programs, and institutional support initiatives. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the critical role of teachers' agency, resilience, and professional commitment in sustaining instructional quality and student learning outcomes.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive approach, to explore the lived experiences of teachers navigating constrained educational contexts. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences, behaviors, and perceptions within their natural settings, emphasizing meaning and context rather than numerical measurement [15]. A descriptive approach involves capturing detailed accounts of phenomena as they occur, allowing researchers to present rich, comprehensive descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences [16]. This approach enables the exploration of complex, context-dependent factors that shape teaching practices, professional well-being, and student engagement, providing an in-depth understanding of the realities faced by teachers in constrained environments.

The qualitative descriptive design is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for the detailed examination of teachers' experiences and adaptive strategies in their authentic classroom settings. This design prioritizes participants' perspectives, providing a platform for their voices to be heard and analyzed. By focusing on descriptive accounts, the study captures the multifaceted nature of teaching under systemic constraints, offering nuanced insights into how professional agency, instructional adaptation, and resilience intersect in practice.

2.2. Participants and sampling

A total of 15 secondary teachers in the Philippines were purposively selected to participate in this study, based on their experience in active teaching roles and willingness to engage in in-depth interviews. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique wherein participants are intentionally chosen for their ability to provide rich, relevant information aligned with the research objectives [17]. This technique was considered most appropriate because it ensured that participants had direct, meaningful experience with the phenomena under investigation. Selection criteria emphasized teaching experience, classroom engagement, and professional insight, enabling the collection of detailed, contextually grounded data that reflects the realities of teaching in constrained Philippine educational environments.

2.3. Research instrument

Data were collected using a set of open-ended guide questions designed to elicit detailed narratives of teachers' experiences, strategies, and perceptions regarding instructional adaptation, student engagement, and professional well-being. The open-ended format facilitated in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, allowing them to describe experiences in their own words and highlight nuanced aspects of teaching practice. The instrument was reviewed and validated by experts in educational research to ensure clarity, comprehensiveness, and alignment with the research objectives. This validation process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, ensuring that the guide questions were capable of eliciting rich, relevant, and meaningful responses.

2.4. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's framework, a systematic method for analyzing qualitative data that emphasizes extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and integrating findings into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon [18]. This approach allowed the researchers to identify key patterns and themes that reflect teachers' lived experiences, while maintaining fidelity to participants' narratives. Colaizzi's method is particularly suitable for studies seeking to capture the essence of lived experiences, as it ensures rigor, transparency, and reliability in qualitative interpretation. The analysis involved repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of meaningful statements, thematic categorization, and synthesis of results into coherent themes that provide insight into instructional adaptation, student engagement, and teacher well-being.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of participants' responses revealed five interrelated themes that capture teachers' experiences of instructional adaptation, student engagement, and professional well-being. These themes illustrate the ways in which systemic constraints shape teaching practices while highlighting the strategies teachers employ to navigate challenges. Table 1 serves as a visual summary of the emergent patterns, representative quotes, and co-occurring relationships that form the basis of the subsequent discussion.

Normalization of instructional compromise: participants described instructional compromise as a necessary strategy to navigate persistent systemic constraints. Teachers often adapt lessons by simplifying content, prioritizing syllabus completion, or lowering expectations to ensure that instructional goals are met despite resource limitations. This behavior reflects a pragmatic negotiation between professional ideals and contextual realities, signaling how structural limitations shape daily pedagogical decision-making. This implies that teachers are constantly balancing educational objectives with feasible implementation strategies, potentially affecting learning depth and quality.

"We just do what is possible, even if it is not the ideal way of teaching."

"Sometimes we have to simplify lessons to ensure we finish the syllabus."

These findings align with research indicating that teachers often adopt pragmatic instructional strategies in response to systemic constraints, balancing professional standards with classroom realities [19]. Moreover, the normalization of compromise is linked to reduced instructional quality and curriculum misalignment, highlighting the structural pressures that shape teaching behaviors [20].

Limited opportunities for pedagogical innovation: teachers reported difficulties in implementing innovative strategies due to rigid schedules, limited resources, and minimal institutional support. These challenges restrict creativity and experimentation in lesson planning, fostering a predominantly traditional approach to teaching. Such limitations imply that systemic barriers constrain teacher agency and affect the learning experiences of students, particularly in fostering engagement, critical thinking, and motivation.

“It is hard to try new strategies when resources and time are very limited.”
“Even when we have ideas, we cannot implement them because of strict schedules.”

Corroborating studies show that limited institutional support and resource scarcity are significant barriers to pedagogical innovation, reinforcing conventional instructional practices and constraining professional growth [21]. These constraints emphasize the influence of systemic structures on teacher creativity and the broader learning environment [22].

Table 1. Emergent themes on instructional adaptation, student engagement, and professional well-being in constrained educational contexts

Theme	Description/essence	Representative quotes (English translation)	Co-occurring themes/relationships
Normalization of instructional compromise	Over time, teachers adapt to constraints by lowering expectations, simplifying lessons, or prioritizing completion over mastery. This becomes an accepted survival strategy rather than an exception.	“We just do what is possible, even if it is not the ideal way of teaching.” (Implied across narratives)	Closely tied to chronic constraints, reduced instructional quality, and curriculum mismatch.
Limited opportunities for pedagogical innovation	Teachers report difficulty introducing innovative strategies due to rigid schedules, lack of support, and limited resources. Instruction often remains traditional or repetitive.	“It is hard to try new strategies when resources and time are very limited.”	Intersects with institutional support deficits, policy constraints, and teacher motivation.
Teacher morale vulnerability	Sustained challenges, limited recognition, and high demands negatively affect teachers’ morale, enthusiasm, and long-term commitment to the profession.	“Sometimes you feel discouraged, but you just continue because it is your responsibility.”	Closely associated with professional identity strain, emotional exhaustion, and institutional undervaluation.
Student compliance over genuine engagement	Classroom participation is often driven by compliance requirements (grades, attendance) rather than intrinsic motivation or interest in learning.	“Some students only participate so they can pass.”	Linked with assessment pressure, student disengagement, and instructional compromise.
Resilience-driven teaching culture	Despite systemic constraints, teachers persist through adaptability, improvisation, and personal commitment. Resilience becomes a defining feature of teaching practice in constrained contexts.	“Even with all these challenges, we continue because we want our students to learn.” (Across participants)	Acts as a counterbalance to burnout, institutional constraints, and morale vulnerability. Resilience sustains instructional continuity.

Teacher morale vulnerability: participants highlighted that sustained high demands, lack of recognition, and persistent systemic challenges negatively impact teacher morale and professional commitment. This implies that structural pressures contribute to emotional exhaustion, professional identity strain, and vulnerability to burnout.

“Sometimes you feel discouraged, but you just continue because it is your responsibility.”
“There are days when you question if it is worth it, yet we continue for the students.”

Research corroborates that teacher morale is closely associated with institutional support, professional acknowledgment, and workload management, with insufficient support leading to decreased motivation and engagement [23]. These findings underscore the importance of teacher well-being in sustaining professional practice and instructional quality [24].

Student compliance over genuine engagement: teachers observed that student participation is often driven by extrinsic motivations such as grades, attendance, or other requirements rather than genuine interest or curiosity in learning. This suggests that learning experiences may be superficial, emphasizing completion over meaningful engagement. According to participants:

“Some students only participate so they can pass.”
“Engagement is often about ticking boxes rather than actual learning.”

Studies indicate that extrinsic motivation dominates in constrained educational settings, which can limit the development of critical thinking, intrinsic motivation, and authentic learning experiences [25]. This

highlights the systemic influences on both teacher practice and student learning behavior, revealing a complex interplay between structural pressures and classroom dynamics [26].

Resilience-driven teaching culture: despite systemic constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience through adaptability, improvisation, and personal commitment to sustaining learning continuity. This implies that resilience is a critical mechanism enabling teachers to maintain instructional quality and professional well-being in challenging contexts.

“Even with all these challenges, we continue because we want our students to learn.”

“Resilience is what keeps us teaching despite the difficulties.”

Studies support the centrality of teacher resilience in professional persistence, highlighting its protective role against burnout and its contribution to instructional continuity [27]. Resilience emerges as both an individual asset and a professional strategy, enabling teachers to navigate constraints while sustaining student learning and engagement [28].

The findings of this study have profound implications for educational practice, teacher agency, and student learning. The normalization of instructional compromise and limited opportunities for pedagogical innovation illustrate how systemic constraints directly shape teaching practices and student experiences, often prioritizing completion over mastery [29]. Furthermore, the prevalence of extrinsic student compliance highlights how systemic pressures influence classroom dynamics, engagement, and motivation, underscoring the need to consider structural factors when analyzing educational outcomes [30].

Teacher morale vulnerability and resilience-driven teaching practices emphasize the critical role of professional well-being in sustaining instructional quality. The ability of teachers to adapt, persevere, and maintain commitment under adverse conditions demonstrates the interplay between personal resilience and professional agency [31]. Collectively, these insights underscore the interconnectedness of systemic structures, teacher practices, and student learning, providing a comprehensive understanding of teaching dynamics in constrained contexts [32].

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between systemic constraints, teacher agency, and student engagement, emphasizing that teaching is not solely a matter of content delivery but also of navigating structural limitations and maintaining professional well-being. The normalization of instructional compromise and limited opportunities for pedagogical innovation indicate that resource scarcity, rigid curricula, and institutional pressures directly shape teachers' practices and the quality of student learning. Moreover, the prevalence of compliance-driven engagement suggests that systemic factors influence not only teaching approaches but also student motivation and classroom dynamics. Recognizing these interconnections can inform the design of professional development programs and institutional policies that better support teachers in managing constraints while fostering meaningful student engagement.

Additionally, the resilience demonstrated by teachers underscores the importance of cultivating professional well-being and adaptive capacity as central to sustaining educational quality. In the future, supporting teacher resilience through mentorship, peer collaboration, and recognition mechanisms may enhance both instructional continuity and emotional sustainability. These findings suggest that educational stakeholders—including school administrators, policymakers, and teacher educators—should consider both structural reforms and targeted supports to empower teachers, ultimately contributing to more effective and context-responsive teaching practices in constrained educational environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that teachers working in constrained educational contexts display significant adaptability and resilience, balancing instructional compromises with efforts to engage students meaningfully. Their experiences reveal a complex interplay between systemic limitations, professional agency, and personal resilience, highlighting the dynamic factors that shape classroom practices and professional well-being. Understanding these dynamics emphasizes that effective teaching encompasses not only pedagogical expertise but also emotional endurance, adaptability, and professional commitment.

Additionally, the findings highlight resilience as a fundamental element in sustaining both teacher well-being and instructional continuity, particularly in resource-limited environments. Future research could explore how institutional support systems, policy interventions, and professional development programs further influence teacher adaptation and resilience, potentially extending these findings across different educational levels, disciplines, and cultural contexts. By elucidating the lived experiences of teachers, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of instructional adaptation, student engagement, and professional well-being, advancing the broader discourse on teaching under systemic constraints.

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This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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Donnie M. Tulud	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mirasol O. Verona	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	
Elangbai B. Dimasingkil	✓	✓		✓					✓			✓		
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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

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O : Writing - Original Draft

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Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research related to human use has been complied with all the relevant national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration and has been approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.




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