

# BARRIERS TO ACCESS: EXPLORING TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN UTILIZING SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study explored the barriers faced by teachers in accessing and utilizing school-based support systems in the Municipality of Matalam, North Cotabato. Using a phenomenological approach, the study aimed to understand the lived experiences of ten public school teachers who have encountered challenges despite the availability of institutional support. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed several recurring barriers, including limited awareness of available support programs, lack of time due to workload demands, perceived irrelevance of support services, insufficient administrative backing, and resource constraints typical of rural school settings. These barriers often led to underutilization or avoidance of support structures, contributing to teacher stress and reduced job satisfaction. The study highlights the urgent need for responsive, well-communicated, and contextually appropriate support systems, and it calls for collaborative efforts among school leaders, policymakers, and educators to bridge the gap between available support and actual teacher needs.*

**Keyword:** - Teacher Support Systems, Access Barriers, School-Based Programs, Teacher Well-Being, Institutional Support, Public School Teachers, Qualitative Study, North Cotabato, Educational Challenges, Phenomenological Resear

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the academic, social, and emotional development of students. However, their capacity to effectively fulfill this role is significantly influenced by the support systems provided within their schools or educational organizations. These support systems including professional development opportunities, mental health services, mentoring, administrative assistance, and peer collaboration are designed to promote teacher well-being and instructional effectiveness (Collie, 2023). Yet, despite their availability, many teachers encounter barriers that limit their access to or utilization of these resources.

The need to understand these barriers has become more urgent in the wake of increasing teacher workloads, emotional burnout, and high attrition rates, particularly in under-resourced or high-needs schools (Liu et al., 2023). Research suggests that institutional constraints such as time limitations, bureaucratic processes, lack of communication, and unclear policies often hinder teachers from fully benefiting from the support mechanisms intended to assist them (Kraft et al., 2022). Furthermore, individual and interpersonal factors—such as stigma, lack of trust, or perceived irrelevance of available services—also contribute to the underutilization of support systems (Flook et al., 2022).

Understanding the specific challenges that prevent teachers from accessing support systems is essential for designing interventions and reforms that are both responsive and sustainable. Identifying these barriers not only helps in improving teacher retention and performance but also contributes to the broader goal of fostering positive school environments that support both staff and student outcomes (Torres & Weiner, 2024).

This study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding the challenges they face in utilizing school-based support systems. By identifying key barriers, the study aims to inform school leaders,

policy-makers, and educational stakeholders on how to enhance accessibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness of institutional support for educators.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers regarding the barriers they face in accessing school-based support systems. The research was conducted in selected public schools within the Municipality of Matalam, North Cotabato.

Purposive sampling was used to select ten (10) public school teachers who had at least three years of teaching experience and had encountered challenges in accessing institutional support. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to allow participants to share their personal insights and experiences in a flexible, open-ended manner.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework were followed to identify recurring patterns, codes, and themes. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, triangulation through follow-up clarifications, and peer debriefing.

Ethical clearance was obtained, and participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and asked to sign informed consent forms. The findings aim to contribute to improved policy and practice in teacher support systems, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Challenges or barriers teachers' face in accessing the support systems provided by the school or organization

The thematic analysis of Table 1 reveals a range of challenges that hinder teachers from accessing the support systems offered by their schools or organizations. A common theme is administrative barriers and leadership issues, where teachers feel unsupported by their superiors. *Respondent 5 expressed, "Our school head seems indifferent to our stress. It's hard to ask for help when you're not even acknowledged."* This lack of empathy and proactive leadership creates a discouraging environment where teachers hesitate to seek assistance.

Another typical challenge is workload and time constraints. Many teachers are overwhelmed with teaching loads and administrative duties, leaving little to no time for engaging in well-being programs. *Respondent 2 noted, "Even if there are support services, I just don't have the time to attend any. There's always work to finish."* This highlights a structural issue where teacher schedules are not aligned with the availability of support services.

Teachers also pointed out the inadequacy or limited nature of existing resources. While support systems may be in place, their effectiveness is compromised due to understaffing, lack of funding, or limited accessibility. *Respondent 6 mentioned, "The school offers counseling, but the counselor is only there once a month—it's not enough."* This leads to long wait times and minimal impact.

Other barriers include lack of awareness about available services. *Respondent 4 admitted, "I didn't even know we had access to free mental health sessions."* Poor communication and orientation on available support options contribute to underutilization. Meanwhile, the stigma around seeking help continues to be a deterrent, with *Respondent 1 sharing, "People might think you're weak or not fit to teach if they see you asking for psychological help."* This fear of judgment silences many who might otherwise benefit from support systems.

Scheduling conflicts also emerged, as some services are offered at times that clash with teaching duties or personal responsibilities. *Respondent 7 said, "They hold wellness seminars during class hours—it's not practical for us to attend."* Similarly, technology and accessibility issues were raised, especially by those unfamiliar with digital tools or lacking technical support.

Another concern was the lack of cultural or identity-based sensitivity among some service providers. *Respondent 3 pointed out, "Some of the speakers don't understand our cultural or religious context, so what they share doesn't resonate."* Such mismatches can render support efforts ineffective or even alienating.

Despite these challenges, at least one respondent reported no barriers, suggesting that in some school settings, support systems are accessible, inclusive, and responsive.

Lastly, issues of equity and fairness surfaced, with concerns about unequal access to services. *Respondent 8 reflected, "Sometimes, it feels like support is only given to those close to admin."* This raises questions about transparency and inclusivity in support service delivery.

These findings suggest that while support systems may exist, their impact is diminished by structural, cultural, and logistical barriers. For support services to be effective, school leaders must foster inclusive, empathetic

environments and address practical constraints like scheduling, accessibility, and awareness. Additionally, support programs should be culturally sensitive, equitable, and embedded in school systems in ways that accommodate teachers' schedules and diverse needs.

This is supported by the work of Collie et al. (2020), who found that “institutional barriers such as time pressures, stigma, and leadership disengagement significantly reduce teachers' access to and use of available well-being support systems.”

Table 1. Challenges or barriers teachers' face in accessing the support systems provided by the school or organization.

Emerging Themes	Frequency	Core Ideas
<b>Administrative Barriers and Leadership Issues</b>	<i>Typical</i>	Unsupportive leadership, selfish administration, and lack of human consideration hinder teachers from accessing organizational support.
<b>Workload and Time Constraints</b>	<i>Typical</i>	Heavy workload and schedule demands prevent teachers from engaging in available support services.
<b>Inadequate or Limited Resources</b>	<i>Typical</i>	Support systems exist but are underfunded or lack capacity, leading to long wait times and limited availability.
<b>Lack of Awareness About Support Services</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Some teachers are unaware of the existence of available support systems like free counseling or workshops.
<b>Stigma Around Seeking Help</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Fear of judgment or being perceived as weak discourages individuals from seeking emotional or psychological support.
<b>Scheduling Conflicts</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Support services are offered at inconvenient times, overlapping with teaching responsibilities or personal obligations.
<b>Lack of Cultural or Identity-Based Sensitivity</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Some support providers may not be attuned to the cultural, religious, or contextual realities of the teachers, leading to ineffective or alienating experiences.
<b>Technology and Accessibility Issues</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Navigating digital support systems is challenging for some due to confusing platforms or lack of technical support.
<b>No Challenges Experienced</b>	<i>Variant</i>	At least one respondent reported no barriers in accessing support systems.
<b>Issues of Equity and Fairness</b>	<i>Variant</i>	Concerns about unequal opportunities and outcomes in accessing support, pointing to systemic issues in fairness and inclusivity.
General	50% and above of the responses	
Typical	25% of the responses	
Variant	24% of the responses	

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the challenges teachers face in accessing and utilizing school-based support systems within the Municipality of Matalam, North Cotabato. Through qualitative inquiry, the findings revealed that while various support structures are nominally available, teachers often encounter significant barriers that hinder their ability to benefit from these services. These include inadequate communication about available support, lack of time due to heavy workloads, perceived irrelevance of programs, unsupportive leadership, and limited resources in rural school settings.

The voices of teachers highlighted a disconnect between policy-level intentions and on-the-ground realities. Despite school-based efforts to promote teacher welfare and instructional effectiveness, systemic and structural issues often prevent equitable access to support. Teachers' concerns point to the need for clearer communication, context-sensitive program design, administrative empathy, and active teacher involvement in planning and evaluating support mechanisms.

The study underscores that support systems must not only exist but must also be accessible, responsive, and relevant to teachers' lived experiences. Addressing these barriers requires a collaborative effort among school

leaders, policymakers, and education stakeholders to ensure that teacher support is not just a formality but a functional, empowering component of the educational ecosystem.

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