

Voices from the Margins: A Phenomenological Exploration of Educational Realities in High-Elevation Communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Educational realities in high-elevation communities remain largely unexplored in the academic literature, despite the distinctive geographical, infrastructural and socio-economic constraints such communities face. This study addressed this gap by exploring the educational realities of residents of three high-elevation communities – Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov – in Nyiev-Ya, Mbaikyor Council Ward of Kwande Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria. The study was conceptually informed by phenomenology, Ecological Systems Theory and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. Ten key informants – two teachers, two school-enrolled children, two out-of-school children, two parents/guardians and two community leaders – were purposively selected across the three communities and interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule, while an observational checklist was used to document the condition of educational infrastructure and facilities. Interview data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); observational data were analysed descriptively. Findings revealed that geographical isolation and infrastructural deprivation profoundly shaped participants' educational realities, even as strong community resilience partially offset institutional neglect. Participants' lived experience of hardship coexisted with an enduring belief in education as a pathway to individual and community transformation. The study concludes that sustainable educational improvement in high-elevation communities requires integrated interventions addressing infrastructure, teacher deployment and instructional resources, planned as a response to the distinct, compounding demands of high-elevation isolation rather than folded into generic rural development strategies.

Keywords: Educational Realities, Lived Experiences, High-Elevation Communities, Geographical Isolation and Phenomenology

Introduction

High-elevation communities, including those in geographical isolation from society, are entitled to educational realities that foster growth and opportunities for their inhabitants. This is so when one considers the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which asserts that "everyone has the right to education", including those in hard-to-reach geographical areas (United Nations, 1948, Article 26). Similarly, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) directs attention to the place of education in "the full development of the human personality", calling for its availability at all levels, particularly for marginalised groups like those in high-elevation communities (United Nations, 1966, Article 13). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) mandates "compulsory and free" primary education for all children, no matter where they live (United Nations, 1989, Article 28). More to that, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in

Education (1960) emphasises equal access to, even for those in geographically isolated regions (UNESCO, 1960). Finally, the United Nations' vision for 2030 set forth in Sustainable Development Goals (2015) calls for inclusive, equitable education, reaching all communities, including those in mountainous or high-altitude areas (United Nations, 2015, Goal 4).

The context established in the forgoing brings the topographical and educational realities within Benue State into focus. The state, located in central Nigeria, is characterised by a spectrum of elevations from 66 feet to 6,365 feet, with an average of 597 feet, according to Topographic-map.com (2024). This varied terrain encompasses both fertile plains along the River Benue and significant elevated features that profoundly shape socio-cultural and economic realities for the indigenous peoples of the state. The state's boundaries stretch from Taraba in the east to Ebonyi, Enugu and Cross River in the south, encompassing a variety of notable high-elevation terrains that contribute to its unique geographical realities. Adeyemi (2016) emphasises the beauty and clement climate of Benue's hills, particularly in areas such as Ushongo and Ikyogen, which potentials to attract tourists due to their scenic beauty and mild weather. These high elevations not only provide breath-taking views, they also contribute significantly to the state's agricultural productivity, capable of supporting year-round grazing, particularly in the renowned Ikyogen cattle ranch. The eastern part of Benue, bordering Taraba and Cross River States, consists of gentle hills and rolling terrains that gradually rise into higher elevations, forming an integral part of the state's diverse topography. Several other key elevated features define the landscape, including the Swem hills that serve as a natural boundary with Cameroon and the culturally important Mkar hills near Gboko.

Within this topographic context, however, Nyiev-Ya, consisting of the three communities of Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov in Mbaikyor Council Ward, Kwande Local Government Area, has a combined population of over 200,000 yet remains one of the most isolated and least studied high-elevation regions in Benue State. These communities reckon with significant challenges arising from geographical inaccessibility and limited infrastructural development, creating unique socio-economic and educational realities for their inhabitants. Access to quality education remains a pressing issue for these high-elevation communities, with geographical isolation severely limiting the provision of schools, qualified teachers and essential learning resources.

The variations in elevation across Benue, as noted by Topographic-map.com (2024), generate the imperative to explore how these geographical realities affect the lives of people in the marginalised areas of the state, particularly in terms of education. Despite the scenic allure of Benue's highlands, existing research has largely overlooked the educational realities faced by the inhabitants of these regions. Phenomenology, a methodological approach that seeks to understand individuals' lived experiences within their socio-geographical contexts, offers a means to explore how geographical isolation shapes educational realities in these communities. Children in areas like Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov face unique challenges in accessing education. The absence of roads and basic amenities exacerbates the educational challenges in these highland areas. As a result, many children are either out of school or attend schools ill-equipped to provide quality education.

This research, therefore, seeks to fill the gap in the understanding of the educational realities of people in Benue's high-elevation communities. The geographical isolation of communities like Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov creates a complex educational landscape where geographical barriers impede access to quality education, where cultural practices such as

subsistence farming compete with formal schooling and where development initiatives often fail to reach these remote areas. This research is also well-placed to address a critical gap in academic literature while highlighting the voices and experiences of those living in Benue State's high-elevation communities, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of educational challenges in marginalised communities. From this phenomenological exploration of the educational realities in these isolated communities, the study seeks to give voice to their struggles, ultimately letting there be light on the dark, under-researched patches of the educational terrain in Nigeria and providing valuable insights that can inform more inclusive educational development strategies for high-elevation communities.

Statement of the Problem

Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov are communities within the bigger Nyiev-Ya community in Mbaikyor Council Ward of Kwande Local Government area in Benue State, eponymously named after the high elevations on which they are situated. These communities are completely inaccessible by mechanical means of transportation (except through the unheard-of option of using an aeroplane), requiring individuals to endure physically challenging acts of climbing to reach the communities. These geographical realities work against educational development, since trained teachers are discouraged from accepting postings to the few schools on these elevated terrains. Furthermore, essential infrastructural facilities are not easily transportable, compounding the challenging educational realities faced by these communities. Moreover, Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov have become "Cinderella" communities, overlooked in terms of educational investment and intervention in Benue State. This neglect constitutes a severe deprivation of human rights, particularly the right to education, which is systematically denied due to a combination of geographical barriers, poor infrastructure and limited governmental attention. These communities are also "Cinderella" in terms of academic research, as their unique educational challenges have remained largely unexplored in scholarly discourse. By deeply exploring how residents of Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov navigate educational deprivation amidst their isolation, this study aims to provide context-specific insights that reveal hidden barriers to education. In doing so, these insights will not only highlight the specific difficulties experienced by these communities, they will also inform actionable and practical recommendations that address their real and actual needs. Ultimately, this approach seeks to ensure that future interventions are specifically tailored to the unique realities of these communities, capable of bridging significant gaps in educational access and of fostering equity and inclusivity for these marginalised populations.

Research Objectives

- i. To identify and describe the educational realities experienced by individuals in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.
- ii. To investigate how the lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, influence their perceptions of educational realities.
- iii. To recommend implications for educational policy and practice in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, based on the educational realities and lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities.

Research Questions

- i. What are the educational realities experienced by individuals in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria?
- ii. How do the lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, shape their perceptions of educational realities?
- iii. What are the implications for educational policy and practice arising from the educational realities and lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria?

Literature Review

The literature relevant for the study focuses on the conceptual framework with insights integrated from empirical studies.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the lived experiences of individuals residing in high-elevation communities. The key concepts central to this exploration are educational realities, high-elevation communities and lived experiences. Educational realities constitute several factors such as the availability of schooling infrastructure, the presence of qualified teachers, and overall educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2000; OECD, 2019; Reardon, 2011; World Bank, 2018). Educational challenges in these areas are characterised by inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of trained educators capable of blocking individuals from access to quality educational experiences in geographically isolated communities (Barrett, Treves, Shmis, Ambasz & Ustinova, 2019; Akhihero, 2011).

Living in high-elevation areas such as the Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov communities in Benue State involves having to reckon with geographical isolation, as these regions are often not accessible except through the stressful physical act of climbing the elevation. Scholars have linked such isolation to negative educational experiences. Curran and Kitchen (2019) highlight that geographical isolation complicates funding, staffing and access to resources, leading to variations in educational realities, which vary across states and demographics. Lived experiences reflect the personal, social and environmental interactions that shape how individuals perceive and engage with realities arising from the social environment (Parnell, Fiske, Stastny, Sewell and Nott, 2023; Gesualdi, 2019). Lived experiences are crucial for revealing the barriers and supports that individuals face, particularly in marginalised contexts of reality. While research acknowledges the importance of lived experiences, it rarely investigates the cultural and environmental factors unique to high-elevation communities, leaving a significant gap in understanding how geographical isolation shapes these experiences.

Therefore, the key concepts central to this exploration, taken together, form a conceptual framework that demonstrates that high-elevation communities can influence educational realities for individuals resident in such communities and shape the lived experiences of educational realities for those residents.

Empirical Studies

Empirical studies consistently outline the challenges posed by geographical isolation, which can also arise from living in high-elevation communities, on educational realities, a

theme that resonates across different contexts. These challenges mirror educational realities reported by Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2019), who examined "Educational Isolation" in rural and coastal areas of England, identifying geographic remoteness, socio-economic deprivation and cultural factors as barriers to teacher recruitment, retention and overall school improvement efforts. This pattern is observed internationally. Curran and Kitchin (2019) established that the geographic isolation of K-12 schools complicated funding and access to qualified teachers, with variations across states and demographics. In rural Colombia, Bonilla-Mejía, Londoño-Ortega and Henao (2024) found that geographical isolation contributed to lower elementary school test scores, particularly in areas far from towns and departmental capitals. Similarly, Drescher, Podolsky, Reardon and Torrance (2022) identified modest overall differences in educational outcomes between rural and non-rural communities in the United States, but found these disparities to be considerably larger for specific socio-economic, racial-ethnic and geographically isolated groups.

International comparisons of geographically isolated and remote students point in a similar direction. Reviews of rural-urban attainment gaps have generally found that disadvantage compounds with distance: students in the most geographically isolated schools tend to show the weakest outcomes relative to national or metropolitan benchmarks, even after accounting for socio-economic status (Curran & Kitchin, 2019; Drescher *et al.*, 2022).

The empirical studies outlined above reveal the profound impact of geographical isolation on educational realities across various countries. However, most existing literature, including the aforementioned studies, often relies on quantitative data and overlooks the lived experiences of those in geographically isolated communities, particularly in the Nigerian context. Additionally, existing studies often fail to reveal how geographical isolation is uniquely intensified by the characteristics of high-elevation living, including difficult terrain and harsh climates, which further impede access to education and resources. This study seeks to fill those gaps by exploring the educational realities of individuals in high-elevation communities in Benue State, Nigeria, using a phenomenological approach. This method will provide a more nuanced understanding of how geographical isolation, specifically in high-elevation settings, shapes educational experiences, offering holistic insights into the challenges faced by these marginalised communities.

Methodology

The study was grounded in a phenomenological qualitative research approach to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the lived educational experiences of individuals residing in the high-elevation communities of Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria, and to explore how their perceptions of education were shaped by their geographical, socio-economic and cultural realities. A phenomenological research design, consistent with the principles advanced by Moustakas (1994), was adopted because it sought to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences through detailed exploration of their subjective realities. Benue State, located in North Central Nigeria and covering approximately 33,955 square kilometres with 23 local government areas, provided the broader context for the study, while the selected communities were characterised by extreme geographical isolation, being largely inaccessible by motorised transportation and reachable only through strenuous mountain climbs. This physical isolation, coupled with limited infrastructure and socio-economic challenges, profoundly influenced educational access, participation and outcomes. The study population comprised both the human population, consisting of residents of the three communities, and the educational infrastructure population,

comprising all educational facilities within the three public primary schools and one public secondary school serving the area. Purposive sampling was used to select ten key informants - two teachers, two school-enrolled children, two out-of-school children, two parents/guardians and two community leaders - drawn across the three communities to capture a range of stakeholder perspectives, consistent with IPA's emphasis on intensive, idiographic engagement with a small, homogeneous sample rather than broad numerical representation. Census sampling was employed to include all educational facilities for observation.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes and an observational checklist designed to capture educational conditions, geographical barriers and socio-economic influences. The credibility of the instruments was strengthened through systematic grounding in existing theoretical and conceptual literature, supplemented by expert review, while participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of findings and interpretations drawn from their accounts. Triangulation across interview and observational data further supported the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), involving repeated reading of interview notes, coding of significant statements, development of emergent themes, clustering into superordinate themes, and synthesis of the essential structure of participants' lived educational experiences. Reflexive bracketing was maintained throughout the analytical process to minimise researcher bias. Because interview data were captured through structured field notes and coded summaries rather than fully transcribed audio recordings, findings are reported below as interpretive syntheses of participants' accounts, attributed by participant category, rather than as direct verbatim quotations; future data collection for this line of enquiry would benefit from audio-recorded, fully transcribed interviews to permit direct quotation and strengthen the auditability of the analysis.

This study explored the educational realities of individuals living in high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Analysis of the interview data generated five interconnected superordinate themes, each comprising emergent subthemes, organised around the three research questions. The themes captured participants' shared lived experiences while recognising the distinct perspectives of teachers, school-enrolled children, out-of-school children, parents/guardians and community leaders. Table 1 summarises the themes and their associated subthemes before they are discussed in detail.

Table 1: Summary of Superordinate Themes and Emergent Subthemes from the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Research Question	Superordinate Theme	Emergent Subthemes
RQ1: What are the educational realities experienced by individuals in high-elevation	Educational deprivation in geographically isolated communities	Long walking distances; mountainous terrain; flooded streams; poor road networks; inadequate classrooms; shortage of teachers; inadequate textbooks and instructional materials; lack of electricity and essential social amenities.



communities in Benue State, Nigeria?		
	Community resilience amidst educational neglect	Community construction of classrooms; employment of PTA teachers; local provision of learning materials; continued parental commitment to education despite hardship.
RQ2: How do the lived experiences of individuals shape their perceptions of educational realities?	Living through hardship shapes perceptions of schooling	Schooling as physically demanding; seasonal disruption of attendance; household and farming responsibilities; dissatisfaction with educational quality.
	Education as hope for future transformation	Learner resilience; regret among out-of-school children; education as a pathway beyond subsistence farming; aspirations for future generations.
RQ3: What are the implications for educational policy and practice?	Need for integrated educational and infrastructural interventions	Road construction; bridges; teacher recruitment; improved classrooms; instructional materials; electricity; telecommunications; equitable government investment.

Note. RQ = Research Question. Themes were derived through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), consistent with the procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994).

Research Question One: What are the educational realities experienced by individuals in high-elevation communities in Benue State, Nigeria?

Analysis of participants' accounts revealed two closely related themes: Educational deprivation in geographically isolated communities and Community resilience amidst educational neglect.

Theme 1: Educational Deprivation in Geographically Isolated Communities

Participants consistently described educational experiences shaped by geographical isolation and inadequate educational provision. Collectively, their accounts suggest that geographical isolation functioned not merely as a physical condition but as a lived educational constraint - one that structured daily participation in schooling, shaped expectations of what education could realistically offer, and reinforced a pervasive sense of institutional neglect. Across all participant groups, difficult terrain, long walking distances, poor roads and seasonal flooding emerged as recurring barriers to accessing education. Teachers explained that schools operated with insufficient instructional materials, poorly equipped classrooms and minimal government support. They indicated that inadequate teaching resources often limited instructional effectiveness, while heavy rainfall and impassable roads regularly delayed

learners and disrupted classroom activities. Although some textbooks were available, teaching aids and other essential instructional resources were largely absent. School-enrolled children similarly portrayed schooling as physically demanding. They reported waking early to undertake long journeys through bush paths and across streams before reaching school. During the rainy season, flooded streams frequently prevented school attendance. They also described shortages of textbooks, desks and exercise books, while the absence of electricity reduced opportunities for studying outside school hours.

Parents and guardians reinforced these observations by describing schools with very limited staffing, inadequate learning facilities and poor transportation infrastructure. They explained that only a small number of government-employed teachers served the communities and that shortages were often addressed through teachers employed by Parent-Teacher Associations. They also identified insecurity, difficult terrain and heavy rainfall as additional factors affecting children's participation in schooling. Community leaders confirmed that schools operated under conditions characterised by poor infrastructure, inadequate educational resources and limited governmental investment. They described roads as largely non-motorable, streams without culverts and school facilities as insufficient for the needs of the communities. Taken together, participants' accounts indicate that geographical isolation and infrastructural deprivation operate not as separate obstacles but as a single, compounding condition that defines what schooling can realistically look like in these communities.

Theme 2: Community Resilience amidst Educational Neglect

Despite describing considerable educational deprivation, participants also revealed strong evidence of community resilience. Rather than abandoning education, communities had developed local strategies to sustain schooling in the face of limited government support. Teachers acknowledged that community members supplemented available educational resources by contributing textbooks, facilities and other materials where possible. Parents similarly described sustained commitment to children's education despite difficult living conditions and limited educational opportunities.

Community leaders explained that residents had mobilised local resources to construct classrooms and employ teachers through Parent-Teacher Associations because government intervention had been inadequate. These community-led initiatives reflected a collective determination to maintain educational opportunities despite structural constraints. The coexistence of educational deprivation and community resilience demonstrates that while institutional support remains limited, local communities continue to regard education as a shared social responsibility and invest substantial effort in sustaining access to schooling.

Research Question Two: How do the lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities shape their perceptions of educational realities?

Two interrelated themes emerged in response to this question: Living through hardship shapes perceptions of schooling and Education as hope for future transformation.

Theme 3: Living Through Hardship Shapes Perceptions of Schooling

Participants' everyday experiences strongly influenced how they perceived education. Teachers generally regarded educational quality as constrained by shortages of instructional materials, inadequate facilities and poor infrastructure. Nevertheless, they also recognised learners as motivated and capable of achieving positive academic outcomes despite these limitations. School-enrolled children described schooling as requiring considerable physical

endurance. Daily travel over difficult terrain, seasonal flooding and competing household responsibilities made school attendance challenging. Some participants explained that farming responsibilities and domestic work occasionally caused lateness or reduced motivation to attend school, while inadequate facilities and learning resources further affected their educational experiences.

Parents expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of education available within their communities, although they acknowledged the commitment demonstrated by many teachers working under difficult conditions. Community leaders similarly viewed educational provision as falling below acceptable standards because of longstanding infrastructural neglect and shortages of educational resources. These experiences collectively shaped a shared perception that schooling in high-elevation communities is considerably more demanding than in more accessible areas. Geographical isolation appeared to function less as an occasional disruption than as a constant, low-grade pressure bearing on nearly every aspect of educational participation.

Theme 4: Education as Hope for Future Transformation

Although participants described significant hardship, they consistently viewed education as the most important pathway towards improving individual and community futures. Teachers observed that many learners remained academically capable, motivated and eager to learn despite resource limitations. School-enrolled children regarded education as essential for achieving literacy, pursuing higher education and securing better life opportunities. While they acknowledged discouragement arising from difficult educational conditions, they nevertheless maintained strong aspirations for educational success. The narratives of out-of-school children provided particularly powerful insights into the perceived value of education. Although both participants had discontinued schooling for different reasons - including long travel distances, family farming responsibilities and doubts arising from unemployment among educated relatives - they expressed regret over leaving school. They continued to regard education as valuable and indicated aspirations to ensure that future generations would benefit from educational opportunities that they themselves had lost. Parents and community leaders similarly viewed education as fundamental to community development and social mobility. Despite dissatisfaction with current educational conditions, they maintained hope that improved governmental intervention would create better educational opportunities for future generations. Taken together, these accounts suggest that prolonged exposure to educational hardship has strengthened rather than diminished participants' belief in the transformative potential of education.

Research Question Three: What are the implications for educational policy and practice arising from the educational realities and lived experiences of individuals in high-elevation communities in Benue State, Nigeria?

Theme 5: Need for Integrated Educational and Infrastructural Interventions

Participants consistently argued that meaningful improvements in education require coordinated investment in both educational services and rural infrastructure. Teachers identified the need for additional classrooms, improved instructional materials, recruitment of qualified teachers and better transportation infrastructure, including roads and bridges. Parents similarly advocated expanded government investment in roads, electricity, telecommunications, classrooms and learning resources, arguing that these amenities were essential for improving educational access and quality. Community leaders emphasised that

schools serving high-elevation communities should meet established Ministry of Education standards regarding infrastructure, staffing and instructional resources. They further argued that improving roads and other basic social amenities would encourage qualified teachers to accept postings to remote communities while enhancing educational participation among children.

Overall, participants viewed educational improvement as inseparable from broader rural development. Their accounts suggest that sustainable educational progress in high-elevation communities will require integrated policies that simultaneously address geographical isolation, educational infrastructure, teacher deployment and wider community development.

Overall Phenomenological Essence

Across all participant groups, a common experiential meaning emerged. Living and learning in the high-elevation communities of Kwande involves negotiating persistent educational hardship created by geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure and limited governmental support. Yet these experiences have also fostered resilience, collective responsibility and an enduring belief that education remains the most promising pathway towards personal advancement, social mobility and community transformation. Rather than diminishing the value attached to education, prolonged experiences of deprivation appear to reinforce participants' commitment to educational opportunity as a means of overcoming structural disadvantage.

Discussion of Findings

This study explored how residents of three high-elevation communities in Kwande Local Government Area experienced and made sense of education under conditions of severe geographical isolation. The findings are discussed below in relation to the empirical and conceptual literature reviewed earlier, and in relation to the study's guiding theoretical frameworks, before their implications for theory, policy and practice are considered.

Educational Realities under Geographical Isolation

The finding that geographical isolation, poor infrastructure and teacher shortages jointly constrained educational access in Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov is broadly consistent with existing research on rural and remote schooling. Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2019) similarly identified geographical remoteness, alongside socio-economic and cultural isolation, as a barrier to teacher recruitment and retention in rural and coastal schools in England, while Curran and Kitchin (2019) found that the geographic isolation of schools complicates funding and access to qualified teachers more broadly across school systems. The present findings extend this literature by showing what such isolation feels like when it is not merely rural but vertical: participants did not describe simply living far from services, but living above them, reachable only by climbing, in a way that shaped nearly every practical dimension of schooling described in Theme 1.

Viewed through Ecological Systems Theory, geographical isolation in this study operated well beyond the immediate classroom microsystem. Poor roads, absent culverts and government underinvestment sit at the level of the exosystem and macrosystem - structures the child does not directly control - yet these filtered down to shape daily, lived conditions inside the classroom and home: late arrivals, cancelled lessons, and household labour competing with study time. This offers one explanation for why participants so consistently

linked distant infrastructural failures to immediate classroom experience; in ecological terms, the two are not separate but nested.

Theme 2, community resilience amidst educational neglect, is less directly anticipated by the reviewed literature, much of which documents deficits without foregrounding community response. Bonilla-Mejía *et al.* (2024), for example, quantify the negative effect of distance from towns and departmental capitals on elementary test scores in Colombia but say comparatively little about how affected communities respond to that disadvantage. The present findings suggest that community-led classroom construction and PTA-funded staffing are not incidental details but a substantive coping mechanism in their own right - one made visible specifically because a phenomenological approach was used, where quantitative attainment-focused designs may not surface it.

Lived Experience, Hardship and the Persistence of Educational Aspiration

Themes 3 and 4 together speak to the attainment gaps reported in comparative literature. Bonilla-Mejía *et al.* (2024) and Drescher *et al.* (2022) both found that geographic and infrastructural disadvantage depresses measured achievement in rural and remote schools, in Colombia and the United States respectively. The present findings suggest one plausible mechanism behind such gaps: not a lack of motivation, but a daily accumulation of physical and logistical hardship - long treks, flooded streams, competing farm labour - that erodes consistent participation regardless of ability or effort.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory offers a useful lens on Theme 4 in particular. Education functioned, in participants' accounts, as a culturally mediated object of activity - a future-oriented goal pursued despite a severe mismatch between that goal and the tools, rules and community resources available to support it. This mismatch, or contradiction in activity-theory terms, arguably explains why hardship and aspiration coexisted so consistently in participants' narratives rather than one simply displacing the other: the contradiction between valued goal and inadequate means appeared to sharpen participants' commitment to education rather than erode it, particularly among out-of-school children who had experienced its absence directly.

The regret expressed by out-of-school children extends the reviewed literature further still. The empirical studies discussed above focus primarily on access and attainment while a participant is enrolled, with comparatively little attention to how withdrawal is experienced afterward. The present findings suggest that withdrawal was not experienced as a neutral or final decision but as an ongoing source of regret and social exclusion, with participants explicitly intending to educate their own children differently. This suggests educational deprivation in these communities may have effects that persist, and are felt, well beyond the point of school withdrawal.

Implications for Theory, Policy and Practice

Theme 5 reinforces the premise, evident throughout the literature reviewed in this article, that educational infrastructure, qualified teachers and instructional resources jointly determine educational outcomes (Barrett *et al.*, 2019). The present findings extend this by grounding that claim in direct testimony from a population rarely represented in either the policy or academic literature, indicating that infrastructure and staffing gaps are not abstract determinants but conditions participants experience directly and specifically. At the same time, the extent of community self-reliance documented in Theme 2 raises a policy caution.

While community-constructed classrooms and PTA-funded teachers demonstrate real social capital, their necessity also indicates that state responsibility for basic education provision has, in practice, been substituted rather than fulfilled. Policy responses that rely on this resilience without addressing its underlying cause risk formalising community self-reliance as a permanent substitute for government investment, rather than as the temporary coping mechanism participants appeared to regard it as.

Considered together, the discussion above suggests that improving educational realities in high-elevation communities such as Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov requires more than isolated interventions in staffing or materials. Consistent with participants' own recommendations in Theme 5, meaningful change appears to depend on addressing geographical isolation itself - through roads, bridges and communication infrastructure - as a precondition for any other educational investment to take hold.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the educational realities of individuals in the high-elevation communities of Diiv, Ityuluv and Injoov in Kwande Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria, and to examine how their lived experiences shaped their perceptions of those realities. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the study found that geographical isolation and infrastructural deprivation combine to produce educational conditions considerably harsher, and more precarious, than those typically described in the wider rural education literature. Read alongside Ecological Systems Theory and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, these findings suggest that isolation operates simultaneously as a structural force acting on communities from without and as a lived contradiction between valued goals and available means acting on individuals from within - two mechanisms that, together, help account for both the hardship and the resilience documented throughout this study. Yet these same conditions coexist with a striking degree of community resilience and an undiminished belief, among nearly all participants, that education remains the surest route to a better future. The study concludes that educational disadvantage in high-elevation communities is not simply a matter of insufficient schools or teachers, but a lived, compounding condition rooted in geographical isolation itself - one unlikely to be resolved by educational investment alone, however well intentioned, unless that investment is paired with the physical infrastructure needed to reach these communities in the first place.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings and discussion above, the following recommendations are made:

- iv. Government at state and local levels should prioritise the construction of roads, bridges and stream culverts connecting high-elevation communities to surrounding towns, as a precondition for the effectiveness of any other educational intervention.
- v. Deliberate teacher recruitment and deployment strategies, including hardship or remote-posting incentives, should be introduced to address the reluctance of qualified teachers to accept postings to geographically isolated schools.
- vi. Government should supply instructional materials, teaching aids and classroom furniture directly to schools in high-elevation communities, rather than leaving this provision to community and Parent-Teacher Association resources.
- vii. Community-led contributions, such as PTA-funded teachers and community-built classrooms, should be formally recognised and supported by government as a

bridge to full state provision, rather than tacitly relied upon as a long-term substitute for it.

- viii. Electricity and telecommunication access should be extended to high-elevation communities to support learning beyond school hours and to improve the flow of information between schools, communities and education authorities.
- ix. Education planning frameworks should explicitly recognise high-elevation or 'vertically isolated' communities as a distinct category of geographical disadvantage, rather than subsuming them within generic rural classifications that may understate the severity of their isolation.

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