



Making meaning of rural teaching: A phenomenological study of teachers' daily life experiences

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ABSTRACT

Rural teachers' experiences in village schools represent a critical dimension of educational development. This phenomenological study explored the meanings that teachers attribute to being a teacher in village schools through their daily lived experiences. The study examined how classroom teachers working in village schools construct meaning from their experiences across four dimensions: managing basic needs and social integration, participating in daily village life, developing teacher-community relationships, and structuring time outside school hours. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 11 classroom teachers (4 female, 7 male) working in multigrade village schools across seven provinces in Türkiye and analyzed using phenomenological methods. The findings reveal that teachers' meaning-making processes are deeply influenced by their cultural alignment with the community, gender dynamics, and physical infrastructure arrangements. While teachers have developed effective strategies for managing basic needs, their sense of professional identity and meaning is significantly shaped by the degree of their community integration. The physical separation of teacher housing from village centers emerged as a critical factor in how teachers interpret their role and position within the community. Teachers sharing cultural similarities with their assigned communities demonstrated more positive meaning-making patterns and deeper understanding of their professional role. Gender emerged as a crucial factor in how teachers construct meaning from their experiences, particularly in accessing and interpreting community spaces and relationships. The study provides significant insights into how rural teachers interpret and make meaning of their professional experiences, suggesting that successful rural teaching involves complex processes of professional identity construction and meaning-making beyond mere adaptation to physical conditions. These findings have important implications for understanding rural teacher identity development and designing support systems that address both practical and existential aspects of rural teaching.

1. Introduction

Rural education has been a crucial component of modernization efforts across developing countries, with teachers serving as key agents of social and educational change. In Turkey, since the establishment of the Republic, rural development has been intrinsically linked to educational advancement, particularly through the role of village teachers. The Village Law of 1924 marked the first systematic attempt to address rural educational needs. It established a framework for village governance and educational provision, which continues to influence rural education today (Akyüz, 2005).

Rural education in developing countries remains a key driver of

social and economic development. Recent research on the experiences of rural teachers in Africa, Latin America and South Asia suggests that the challenges faced by teachers in these regions and the adaptation strategies they develop show similar patterns. For example, a study comparing rural teacher preparation programmes in Australia, South Africa and Mexico highlights the need for teacher preparation processes to consider the local context (Ledger et al., 2021). Similarly, research examining the experiences of teachers working in rural areas of Vietnam suggests that cultural and linguistic differences significantly influence teachers' professional adjustment (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). A recent study conducted in rural schools in Africa reveals that teachers need systematic support on quality of work life and stress management

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(Ogakuwu et al., 2024).

As of 2023, there are 5582 village schools in Turkey and 19563 teachers are working in these schools (T.C. Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2023). It should be noted that these schools are located in regions with different socio-cultural characteristics. These villages, defined as settlements with populations under 2000, represent more than just demographic units. They are complex social ecosystems where culture, tradition, and modern educational imperatives intersect (Kurt, 2006). The challenges of rural teaching are not unique to Turkey; they reflect broader patterns observed in developing countries worldwide (Biddle, Azano, 2019). Research from various contexts indicates that rural teachers face similar challenges in managing basic needs, integrating into communities, and balancing professional duties with personal life (Burton et al., 2013; Herzog and Pittman, 2020). However, the specific cultural, social, and institutional contexts of Turkish village schools create unique conditions that warrant careful investigation. Understanding these experiences within Turkey's distinctive rural education landscape can contribute valuable insights to the broader international discourse on rural education in developing contexts. Recent international studies highlight similar challenges in rural education across developing nations. In Kenya, research on rural secondary schools reveals how educational infrastructure impacts teacher retention and community development (Ogawa, 2024). Similarly, studies from rural South Africa demonstrate that teacher preparation for rural contexts requires specific attention to cultural integration and community engagement (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Community-based initiatives in rural areas have shown promising results in improving educational outcomes, as evidenced by research in East Africa (Bagenda et al., 2021). Additionally, longitudinal studies in rural China indicate that alternative hiring policies significantly influence teachers' career decisions and community integration patterns (Liao, 2019). Beyond these traditional challenges, contemporary rural education research has increasingly focused on technological integration and post-pandemic adaptations.

Recent research on rural education has increasingly focused on digital transformation and technology integration, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19. Castro et al. (2022) examined how robotics education in STEM subjects breaks down barriers in rural multigrade schools, finding that innovative technological approaches can mitigate geographical isolation challenges. The pandemic has accelerated digital adoption in rural education contexts, though with significant disparities in access and implementation (Tshering et al., 2024). These researchers found that Bhutanese teacher educators' attitudes toward technology acceptance had substantial implications for rural developing countries, where infrastructure limitations often complicate digital integration.

Post-pandemic community relations research reveals evolved patterns of teacher-community engagement. Wu et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between social support and work engagement among rural teachers, establishing a complex mediated model that demonstrates how community integration significantly impacts professional satisfaction. Similarly, Ogakuwu et al. (2024) conducted an intervention study on quality of work-life and stress management among rural primary school teachers, revealing that post-pandemic support systems require systematic approaches that address both psychological well-being and professional development needs. Dontogan et al. (2024) explored stakeholder engagement in multigrade classroom teaching, demonstrating how inclusive pedagogy necessitates robust community partnerships, particularly in resource-constrained environments where traditional support structures were disrupted by pandemic conditions. These technological and post-pandemic dimensions add another layer of complexity to the meaning-making processes of rural teachers that this study investigates, particularly regarding community integration and professional identity development.

2. Basic needs and social integration in rural teaching contexts

The management of basic needs and social integration represents a fundamental challenge in rural teaching contexts. Rural areas typically demonstrate stronger preservation of cultural traditions compared to urban centers, partly due to reduced exposure to globalization effects and stronger kinship networks (Abdelazim Ahmed, 2017). These areas, particularly village environments, serve as repositories of both national and local cultural elements (Özkul, 2013), creating unique challenges for teachers' adaptation and integration (Corbett and Gereluk, 2020).

Research by Cowen et al. (2012) demonstrates how school location and housing arrangements significantly impact teachers' ability to establish meaningful community connections. These findings align with observations in the Turkish context, where the physical separation between teacher housing and village centers often creates barriers to community integration (Kavruk et al., 2012). Miller and Youngs (2021) emphasize how teachers' initial experiences with basic needs management and social integration significantly influence their professional satisfaction and retention.

Recent studies from developing nations provide additional insights into teachers' basic needs management and social integration. Research from Niger demonstrates how teachers develop adaptive strategies despite resource limitations in conflict-affected rural areas (Murugaiah, 2023). Similarly, a comprehensive study of Chinese rural teachers reveals that successful integration significantly impacts teachers' subjective well-being and professional satisfaction (Tang, 2018). In Kenya, research on rural day secondary schools highlights how infrastructure and resource accessibility influence teacher retention and community engagement patterns (Ogawa, 2024). These international findings align with observations in the Turkish context, particularly regarding the relationship between physical infrastructure and community integration.

2.1. Participation in daily village life

The cultural dimension of rural education is particularly significant in shaping teacher experiences and effectiveness. Culture, understood as the collective beliefs, habits, and practices that help individuals interpret reality and determine social relationships (Banja, 1996), serves as a crucial mediating factor in rural educational settings. Traditional values in rural communities often function as social adhesive, binding communities together while simultaneously influencing their approach to education and change (Dewey, Çev. 2010).

International research on rural education has identified several consistent patterns in teachers' community participation. Studies from diverse contexts (Burton et al., 2013) indicate that successful rural teaching requires more than pedagogical competence; it demands sophisticated cultural navigation skills and community integration abilities. Herzog and Pittman (2020) emphasize that effective rural teachers must understand and engage with local community dynamics, while Reininger (2012) found that teachers' cultural familiarity with their assigned communities significantly influences their professional success and retention.

Recent research from diverse developing contexts enriches our understanding of teachers' community participation. A study examining rural teachers' lived experiences in Western Cape reveals how daily community engagement shapes professional identity and teaching effectiveness (Ledger et al., 2021). In conflict-affected regions of Niger, teachers develop unique strategies for community participation while managing resource constraints (Murugaiah, 2023). Research from Vietnam's ethnic minority regions demonstrates how cultural and linguistic factors influence teachers' community integration patterns (Karlıdag-Dennis et al., 2020). Additionally, studies from Kenya highlight how rural teachers' participation in community life impacts educational outcomes and student engagement (Bagenda et al., 2021).

2.2. Teacher-community relationships

The role of teachers in rural settings encompasses a spectrum of responsibilities that exceed traditional educational duties (Hansen, 2020; White and Downey, 2021). Research indicates that rural educators frequently serve as community leaders and cultural mediators, with their influence significantly transcending the classroom environment (Karacabey et al., 2022; Gentrup et al., 2024; Hammad et al., 2024). For instance, many teachers in rural Turkish schools engage with community members to foster educational improvements and cultural understanding, thereby reinforcing their pivotal role within the community (Karacabey et al., 2022). Additionally, rural teachers often act as bridges between educational policies and local practices, facilitating a necessary connection that enhances both teaching effectiveness and community cohesion (Hammad et al., 2024).

This expanded role of teachers in rural areas brings about complex dynamics in teacher-community relationships, requiring educators to navigate professional responsibilities while deeply engaging with the cultural and social fabric of their communities (Karacabey et al., 2022). They must exhibit cultural sensitivity and adaptability, often aligning their teaching methods to local practices and values. This requires not only pedagogical skills but also an understanding of community needs and preferences (Gentrup et al., 2024; Hammad et al., 2024).

Contemporary studies from developing nations offer valuable insights into these teacher-community relationship dynamics. In rural Pakistan, community organizations significantly influence teacher motivation and professional efficacy (Barrs, 2005). Research from South Africa reveals how practicum experiences in rural settings shape student teachers' understanding of community engagement (Mukeredzi, 2014). Recent studies in Northwestern Vietnam demonstrate how ethnic minority teachers navigate complex cultural relationships within rural communities (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). Furthermore, research from Kenya highlights how community initiatives can enhance teacher-parent relationships and improve learning outcomes (Bagenda et al., 2021).

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping these dynamics, particularly in traditional communities where distinct gender roles may create barriers for educators, particularly female teachers. Gender influences access to community spaces and the ability to form relationships necessary for effective teaching (Thien et al., 2023; Tshering et al., 2024). The hierarchical roles in many rural settings often restrict female teachers from engaging fully with community initiatives compared to their male counterparts (Thien et al., 2023). Studies document how traditional gender norms impact female teachers' professional opportunities, thus influencing their effectiveness and integration into the community (Tshering et al., 2024).

The challenges faced by female teachers are significant in rural Turkish educational contexts. Female educators often navigate societal expectations that limit their career advancement opportunities, thus affecting not only their professional life but also their interactions with the community (Cansoy et al., 2022). These dynamics show how gendered expectations can dictate the roles and responsibilities assigned to teachers, leading to different experiences and challenges for male and female educators (Cansoy et al., 2022).

In summary, rural educators, particularly in Turkish contexts, carry multifaceted responsibilities as educators, community leaders, and cultural mediators. Gender significantly influences these dynamics, often dictating the extent to which teachers can integrate into their communities and fulfill their roles effectively. As such, it's essential that any policies or support mechanisms designed for rural education take these complex relationships into account to foster a more equitable and effective educational environment.

2.3. Time spent out of school

Research indicates that teachers' experiences in rural settings evolve significantly over time, from initial adjustment challenges to longer-

term adaptation patterns (Voss and Kunter, 2020). This temporal dimension is particularly important in understanding how teachers develop coping strategies and construct meaning from their experiences. The initial "reality shock" (Veenman, 1984) often gives way to more complex patterns of adaptation as teachers learn to navigate the intersecting demands of professional duties and community life.

The lived experience of rural teaching is shaped by the complex interaction of multiple contextual factors. Physical infrastructure (Cowen et al., 2012), cultural dynamics (Herzog and Pittman, 2020), and social relationships (Wu, et al., 2025) do not operate in isolation but rather form an interconnected web that teachers must navigate daily. Understanding how these factors interact and collectively shape teachers' experiences is crucial for developing more effective support systems.

Ulferts (2016) emphasizes the need for contextualized support systems that acknowledge the unique challenges of rural teaching, including time management outside formal teaching hours. The results of this study indicate that teachers' ability to balance professional responsibilities with personal life significantly influences their satisfaction and effectiveness in rural settings.

Studies from diverse developing contexts provide additional perspectives on teachers' time management in rural settings. Recent research from rural elementary schools shows how teachers integrate social and emotional learning into both structured and unstructured time (Baek and Dyson, 2024). In rural Vietnam, studies reveal how teachers' out-of-school activities influence community relationships and professional development (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). Current research from African rural schools demonstrates the importance of structured professional development in teachers' time allocation patterns (Mitchell et al., 2020). These findings complement existing literature by highlighting how cultural contexts shape teachers' use of time outside formal teaching hours.

While existing research has examined various aspects of rural teaching, several significant gaps remain in the literature. First, while studies have documented the challenges of basic needs management and social integration (Cowen et al., 2012; Kavruk et al., 2012), there is limited phenomenological understanding of how teachers experience and make meaning of these challenges. Second, although existing research acknowledges the importance of community participation (Herzog and Pittman, 2020), we lack deep insight into how teachers experience and interpret their engagement with village life. Third, while teacher-community relationships have been studied in several studies (Olsen et al., 2022; Green et al., 2013) the lived experience of navigating these relationships remains understudied. Finally, research on teachers' time management in rural settings has focused primarily on professional aspects, leaving the personal dimension of time experience relatively unexplored.

We believe that a phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate for addressing these gaps because it allows us to move beyond surface-level descriptions to understand the deeper meanings teachers attribute to their experiences (Baker et al., 1992; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). As Creswell (2013) emphasizes, phenomenological research is especially valuable when seeking to understand shared experiences within specific contexts, making it ideal for examining the essence of rural teaching experience. Therefore, this study attempts to address these gaps through a phenomenological investigation by exploring four interconnected aspects of rural teaching experience:

1. How teachers experience and manage their basic needs and social integration
2. How they participate in and make meaning of daily village life
3. How teacher-community relationships develop and evolve
4. How teachers structure and experience their time outside school hours

This study has the potential to make three distinct contributions to the literature on rural education. First, by employing a

phenomenological approach, it provides deep insight into how teachers experience and make meaning of rural teaching, moving beyond descriptive accounts to understand the essence of this experience. Second, it examines the intersection of professional and personal life in rural teaching contexts, illuminating how teachers navigate these boundaries in their daily experiences. Third, it contributes to understanding how cultural alignment, gender dynamics, and physical infrastructure shape teachers' lived experiences in rural settings.

Following established phenomenological research principles (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018; Baker et al., 1992), our analysis reveals the essential structures of these experiences, uncovering complex patterns in how teachers experience and make meaning of rural teaching. This phenomenological understanding has significant implications for teacher preparation, professional development, and rural education policy in developing contexts, particularly as Turkey continues its efforts to revitalize rural education through increased teacher appointments to village schools (Akan and Başar, 2022). To strengthen our phenomenological approach and provide a robust theoretical foundation for our analysis, we drew upon established phenomenological traditions.

This study's methodological approach was further informed by both Van Manen (1990); Manen (2014) hermeneutic phenomenology and Schutz's (1967) phenomenological sociology. Van Manen's perspective on lived experience research emphasizes the importance of capturing the pre-reflective, immediate awareness of life as it is lived, rather than as it is conceptualized. As van Manen (2014) argues, phenomenological inquiry involves "wondering about the meaning of experience" while attempting to "recover original experience in all its vividness and immediacy" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 39). This approach guided our interview protocol development, particularly in crafting questions that accessed teachers' immediate lived experiences rather than their theoretical understandings of rural teaching. Complementarily, Schutz's (1967) phenomenological sociology, which examines how individuals construct meaning through intersubjective understanding within their social worlds, informed our analytical framework. Schutz's emphasis on the "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) as the realm of everyday experiences and social interactions provided a theoretical lens for examining how rural teachers navigate the intersection of professional identity and community integration. Following Schutz's approach, our analysis focused on identifying how teachers' meaning-making processes emerge through shared typifications and reciprocal perspectives within the rural community context. This dual theoretical framework enhanced our capacity to examine both the subjective lived experiences of individual teachers and the intersubjective processes through which these experiences acquire meaning within specific social contexts. With this theoretical grounding in both hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenological sociology, we proceeded with our research design as described below.

3. Method

This study employed a phenomenological research design, one of the qualitative research methods, to deeply explore the experiences of classroom teachers who teach in village schools and the meanings they attribute to teaching. Phenomenological research aims to uncover individuals' experiences, perceptions, and the meanings they attribute to a phenomenon (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2018). As Creswell (2013) states, phenomenological research primarily seeks answers to two fundamental questions: "What are the experiences related to the phenomenon?" and "What are the contexts and conditions in which these experiences occur?"

Given that, this research design was thought to be particularly appropriate for this study as it allowed us to explore how classroom teachers who live and work in village schools experience teaching and make sense of their professional lives. Additionally, this research design provides a framework for understanding both the individual experiences and the shared essence of these experiences among teachers working in similar contexts (Baker et al., 1992).

In line with the phenomenological research design, the study focused on understanding the lived experiences of teachers in village schools through their personal accounts and observations of their natural work environment. This enabled us to capture both the unique aspects of individual experiences and the common patterns that emerged across different teachers' experiences.

3.1. Research participants

In phenomenological research studies, data sources are individuals or groups who experience the phenomenon being studied and can articulate these experiences (Baş and Akturan, 2008). The participants in this study were 11 classroom teachers (4 female, 7 male) who were teaching in multigrade village schools and residing in these villages across seven different provinces in Turkey: Erzincan, Erzurum, Bayburt, Ağrı, Iğdır, Şanlıurfa, and Çanakkale. Participants were selected using criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods. Considering that purposive sampling allows for in-depth study of information-rich cases (Patton, 2014), the purposive sampling method was adopted in this study. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: being a graduate of elementary education department, working in a multigrade school, and residing in the village where they teach.

Multigrade schools were specifically included in our criteria because multigrade environments represent a significant and challenging dimension of rural education in countries like Turkey. In these schools, teachers are tasked with instructing students of different ages and grade levels simultaneously, significantly impacting teaching practices and student outcomes (Rotas, 2020; Motamedi and Khajouie, 2020; Dontogan et al., 2024). Managing multigrade classrooms requires teachers to develop complex curriculum planning, innovative teaching methodologies, and robust classroom management strategies (Naparan, Ivy Leigh, 2021; Dontogan et al., 2024; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2015).

The prevalence of multigrade teaching in many developing nations makes our findings more relevant to educational development and reform discourse. In rural or low-enrollment settings, multigrade schools offer a practical solution where traditional monograde systems are unsustainable (Motamedi and Khajouie, 2020). The challenges faced by teachers in these environments highlight gaps in teacher preparation and support, which, if unaddressed, could exacerbate professional dissatisfaction and burnout among educators (Naparan, Ivy Leigh, 2021; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2015; Marasigan, 2021).

Additionally, evaluating teacher experiences in multigrade environments provides insights applicable across various educational contexts, especially regarding differentiated instruction and inclusive pedagogy. Teachers in these settings learn to implement diverse pedagogical strategies and respond to varied developmental needs, thereby enriching their instructional practices (Dontogan et al., 2024; Seban, 2015). Table 1

Regarding the gender distribution in our sample (7 male, 4 female), it is important to contextualize this composition within broader patterns of teacher demographics in Turkish rural schools. According to recent

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants.

Participants	Gender	Age	Seniority Year	City of residence	Graduation GPA
f1	Female	30	6	Metropolitan	2,98
f2	Male	32	6	Province Centre	3,27
f3	Female	26	2	District	2,8
f4	Male	29	2	Village	3,46
f5	Male	28	3	Metropolitan	3
f6	Female	26	2	Province Centre	3,42
f7	Male	27	3	Village	3,18
f8	Male	26	3	District	3,15
f9	Female	27	3	District	3,33
f10	Male	31	8	District	2,89
f11	Male	28	2	Metropolitan	3,24

Ministry of National Education statistics (T.C. Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2023), male teachers continue to be overrepresented in rural educational settings, particularly in remote multigrade village schools, with approximately 60% of rural teaching positions filled by male educators. This disproportionate representation stems from multiple factors, including cultural expectations, safety concerns, and infrastructure limitations that often influence teaching appointments and acceptances in rural contexts (Özer, 2016; Taşkın and Nayir, 2021). While our sample's gender ratio (64 % male) closely approximates the national distribution, we acknowledge that this representation may limit the comprehensiveness of our gender analysis. Nevertheless, the experiences of our four female participants provided rich phenomenological data that illuminates the gender-specific dimensions of rural teaching experience.

The participants had varied backgrounds but shared similar professional contexts. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 8 years, with an average of 3.6 years. All participants held bachelor's degrees in classroom teaching from different universities across Turkey, with GPAs ranging from 2.80 to 3.46 on a 4.00 scale. Participants' academic backgrounds, including their GPA information, were collected to examine whether prior academic performance correlates with adaptation patterns and teaching effectiveness in rural contexts, though this ultimately did not emerge as a significant factor in our phenomenological analysis. Three participants came from metropolitan cities, two from provincial centers, four from districts, and two from villages, representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds that enriched the study's perspective on village teaching experiences.

Some of the detailed characteristics of the participants that were thought to shape their rural teaching experience were expressed as follows. Starting with participant (f1), who graduated from a multigrade rural school, currently volunteers for disaster relief (AFAD), actively participates in social projects, and chose teaching inspired by their primary school teacher. Moving to participant (f2), who grew up in a small town, has limited social interactions, and chose teaching due to family influence. Participant (f3) was raised by grandparents after losing parents during high school years, participated in "Teachers as Insurance of Education" project during university, and entered teaching based on university entrance exam scores. As for participant (f4), they graduated from a multigrade rural school, worked while studying at university, conducted local tours to support family income, and demonstrates strong commitment to rural development. Looking at participant (f5), they have multicultural background (Crimean-German heritage), father was a primary school teacher who worked in various rural schools, bringing extensive rural education experience. Participant (f6) spends holidays in highland villages and uses social media exclusively for educational purposes. Regarding participant (f7), they graduated from a multigrade rural school, currently pursuing graduate studies while teaching, and assists family with agricultural work during holidays. Participant (f8) actively engages in outdoor activities including camping and represents urban background among participants. Meanwhile, participant (f9) demonstrates strong interest in cultural activities and self-funds professional development. Participant (f10) actively participates in rural school improvement projects, including library establishment and village school renovation. Finally, participant (f11) is pursuing graduate studies and primarily uses technology for educational purposes. The majority of participants chose teaching based on university entrance exam scores rather than specific interest in rural education. While some grew up in rural areas similar to their current teaching locations, most came from urban backgrounds. Their socioeconomic status (SES) is predominantly low, which provides them with insight into the socioeconomic challenges faced by rural students and communities. All participants reside in the villages where they teach, allowing for deep immersion in rural life and community dynamics.

The researchers are also considered key participants in this phenomenological study. One of the researchers has three years of experience teaching in multigrade village schools and a total of 19 years

of professional experience. Having grown up in a village and spent 10 years teaching in village schools, this background provided valuable insider perspective. Two Associate Professors with extensive experience in qualitative research methods also served as researcher-participants. One of the researchers has 20 years of experience as an academic in the field of classroom teaching while the other brings expertise in social studies education and qualitative research methodology.

Following the phenomenological tradition, all researchers engaged in the bracketing (also called *epoché*) process throughout the study. This involved consciously setting aside their preconceptions, previous experiences, and assumptions about village teaching to approach the phenomenon with fresh eyes. The researchers maintained reflexive journals documenting their personal biases, assumptions, and prior experiences with village teaching. Regular meetings were held among the researchers to discuss and challenge each other's assumptions and interpretations, ensuring that their prior experiences enriched rather than biased the analysis. As Creswell (2013) emphasizes, this bracketing process is crucial in phenomenological research to allow the essence of participants' experiences to emerge without being filtered through researchers' preconceptions.

This combination of participant experiences and careful attention to the bracketing process strengthened the phenomenological nature of this research, allowing for a rich, nuanced understanding of what it means to be a village school teacher in Turkey while maintaining methodological rigor.

3.2. Data collection process

In phenomenological research, data collection aims to gather detailed descriptions of lived experiences through various methods. Our data collection process began with extensive preliminary work, including meetings with experienced village school teachers and a comprehensive literature review on rural education and teaching experiences. This initial phase generated 176 potential interview questions, which were subjected to expert review by three qualitative researchers who organized them into five thematic areas: teachers' personal and professional backgrounds, experiences of living in the village, teaching practices in multigrade classrooms, professional development and support, and meanings attributed to village teaching.

Before finalizing the data collection instruments, we conducted extensive preliminary work to ensure comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon. Through the initial efforts, the pool of questions was subjected to expert review by three qualitatively-oriented researchers who helped organize them into thematic areas. The refinement of the interview protocol continued through pilot testing with three different village teachers. This pilot testing was crucial in evaluating questions for clarity, relevance, and their ability to elicit rich phenomenological descriptions. Through this process, overlapping questions were merged and redundant ones eliminated, which resulted in a final protocol of 93 questions across the themes.

The observation protocol underwent a similar development process. Initial drafts included comprehensive aspects of the village school teaching context, which were then refined through expert review to focus on key phenomenological aspects. Pilot observations conducted in two village schools helped further refine the protocol. This resulted in 20 structured items that captured essential aspects of the teaching and living environment. These items focused on the physical environment of schools and villages, teacher-student interactions, community integration, and daily routines and practices.

Data were collected through in-person school visits where possible, with each visit lasting a full day to capture the natural flow of school and village life. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were shared with participants for member checking to ensure accurate representation of their experiences.

This phenomenological study employed a deliberately structured data collection process that spanned multiple seasons throughout 2022.

Data collection was conducted from February to November 2022, encompassing winter, spring, and fall periods to capture seasonal variations in rural teaching experiences. Five schools were visited during the winter-spring transition months (February-May), while the remaining six schools were visited during late spring (May-June) and fall (September-November). This seasonal distribution was methodologically significant as it allowed us to observe how environmental contexts influenced teachers' lived experiences across changing conditions. During winter-spring visits, we documented how teachers navigated transportation challenges and limited mobility, with community engagement patterns often constrained by weather conditions. As one participant noted: "Winter isolation fundamentally changes how we experience our professional role in the community." In contrast, late spring and fall visits revealed different dimensions of rural teaching, with teachers demonstrating increased community participation through agricultural activities and seasonal celebrations. This temporal variation significantly influenced teachers' meaning-making processes, particularly regarding resource management and community integration opportunities. For example, fall data collection captured how teachers were preparing strategic stockpiling of essential supplies in anticipation of winter isolation. The multi-seasonal approach enhanced the phenomenological depth of our study by revealing temporal dimensions of rural teaching experience that would remain hidden in single-season investigations, thereby strengthening the validity of our findings regarding the contextual nature of teachers' professional meaning-making processes.

3.3. Validity and reliability

To ensure trustworthiness in phenomenological research, we implemented comprehensive strategies. Data triangulation was achieved through multiple sources (interviews and observations) and multiple researchers. The involvement of researchers with different backgrounds - including direct experience in village teaching and expertise in qualitative methodology - provided complementary perspectives during data collection and analysis. Regular team meetings were held to discuss and challenge each other's interpretations, ensuring that findings emerged from the data rather than preconceptions.

Member checking was implemented systematically throughout the study. After transcription, interview transcripts were shared with participants, allowing them to review their responses and provide clarifications or additional insights. This process not only verified the accuracy of our data but also provided participants with opportunities to reflect further on their experiences, often leading to richer descriptions of the phenomenon.

To ensure data accuracy, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim on the same day they were conducted. This immediate transcription allowed researchers to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details while the interactions were still fresh in memory. The research team held regular meetings to discuss their field notes and initial interpretations, helping maintain consistency in data collection and documentation procedures.

Following Creswell's (2013) recommendations for phenomenological research, we maintained detailed audit trails documenting all methodological decisions and changes. This included keeping reflexive journals where researchers documented their thoughts, potential biases, and decision-making processes throughout the study.

3.4. Data analysis

The data analysis process followed a systematic phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of village teaching experiences. Our analysis was guided by Saldana's (2019) First Cycle Coding Methods, specifically employing In Vivo coding to preserve participants' authentic voices and meanings.

The analysis began with a thorough reading of all interview

transcripts and observation notes to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Following this initial reading, we conducted a detailed line-by-line analysis using In Vivo coding, which involves using participants' exact words as codes. This approach was particularly valuable in our phenomenological study as it helped maintain the integrity of participants' lived experiences and their unique ways of expressing these experiences.

We followed a four-step analytical process as outlined by Creswell (2013). First, significant statements were identified and coded using participants' own words. Each interview transcript was analyzed independently by two researchers, who then met to compare and discuss their coding decisions. This process generated numerous initial codes that closely reflected participants' experiences and perspectives.

The second phase involved organizing these initial codes into categories. Similar codes were grouped together, with careful attention to maintaining the phenomenological essence of participants' experiences. This process was iterative, with categories being refined and reorganized as new insights emerged from the data. Regular meetings among the research team helped ensure the categories accurately represented the data while maintaining phenomenological relevance.

In the third phase, categories were synthesized into broader themes that captured the essential aspects of village teaching experiences. This process involved extensive discussion among the research team, returning to the original data frequently to ensure the themes remained grounded in participants' actual experiences. Following Yıldırım and Şimşek's (2018) guidance, we paid particular attention to identifying both common patterns and unique variations in participants' experiences.

Throughout the analysis, we maintained the phenomenological tradition by using direct quotations extensively. These quotations were selected to illustrate both typical and unique experiences, providing rich, detailed evidence for our interpretations. As Baker et al. (1992) suggest, these verbatim accounts are crucial in phenomenological research for conveying the authentic voice and lived experience of participants.

To ensure analytical rigor, we engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions where interpretations were discussed and challenged. An audit trail was maintained documenting all analytical decisions, and member checking was conducted with participants to verify our interpretations of their experiences. This comprehensive analytical approach helped ensure our findings authentically represented the essence of village teaching while maintaining methodological rigor.

4. Findings

The findings are organized into four main categories that emerged from the phenomenological analysis: basic needs and social integration, participation in daily village life, teacher-community relationships, and time allocation patterns outside school hours. Each category reveals distinct yet interconnected aspects of rural teaching experience, providing insights into how teachers navigate both professional and personal challenges in rural educational settings. The analysis particularly focuses on how teachers' experiences are shaped by cultural, social, and structural factors, and how these experiences influence their understanding of rural teaching. Table 2

The data analysis indicates that parental engagement in educational activities is substantially limited by socio-cultural and economic factors. Participation in parent-teacher meetings is constrained by agricultural commitments and perceived relevance of education. This limitation is particularly evident during winter months when male community members migrate to metropolitan areas for employment, creating a gender-based participation barrier, as female community members demonstrate reluctance to engage with male teachers. The study reveals that systematic home visits are predominantly conducted by female teachers and those with regional familiarity. As one participant reported: "I visit their homes and invite them to mine. Every evening, a parent

Table 2
Content Analysis of Rural Teachers' Daily Life Experiences and Professional Meaning-Making.

Life in Rural Context	Theme	Category	Code
	Professional Activities	Parental Engagement	Parent-teacher conferences
			Home visits
			Educational support from parents
		Educational Activities	Parent education initiatives
			Teaching-learning processes
			Group supplementary education
	Personal Life Outside School	Meeting Basic Needs	Individual tutoring sessions
			Through individual effort
			Through request to villagers
			Through acquaintances outside the village
		Daily Household Routines	Family time
			Spending time with friends
			Picnics
			Trips
		Community Integration	Participation in ceremonies
			Response to invitations
			Religious practices
			Neighborhood relations
		Leisure Activities	Mutual assistance
			Support received from villagers
			Support provided to villagers
			Nature walks
			Reading practices

invites me for a visit," illustrating the gendered nature of community engagement.

The analysis demonstrates a significant decline in parent education initiatives compared to previous periods. The data suggests that gender dynamics significantly influence the success of these initiatives, as evidenced by one participant's experience: *"I started a literacy course. However, female participation was minimal due to my gender as a male teacher, necessitating the course's termination."*

Educational planning with families demonstrates a focused approach to addressing individual learning differences and health-related concerns. This is exemplified through systematic interventions, as one participant indicated: *"We organize individualized meetings to address specific deficiencies."* Another participant's account provides evidence of targeted educational support: *"Upon identifying two underperforming students, I implemented daily individualized instruction sessions of 30–60min, successfully facilitating their academic progress."*

The findings indicate that teachers develop strategic approaches to managing basic needs, particularly in response to geographical and climatic challenges. The data reveals a complex network of resource acquisition, involving both independent procurement and community support systems. One participant's account illustrates this adaptive strategy: *"We implement preventive measures by stockpiling supplies during potential road closures. The community demonstrates solidarity through provision of essential resources, including water during infrastructure challenges and traditional food items."*

The spatial relationship between school housing and village centers emerges as a critical factor affecting professional integration and community relationships. The data indicates that physical separation significantly impacts social integration, as demonstrated by one participant's observation: *"The location of school housing substantially limits*

community interaction. This spatial separation creates isolation, particularly affecting spouses, ultimately influencing professional retention decisions."

Sociocultural alignment emerges as a significant factor in community integration. Teachers sharing cultural backgrounds with their assigned communities demonstrate enhanced engagement in community activities. This is evidenced by one participant's reflection: *"Cultural familiarity facilitates meaningful participation in traditional activities, fostering a sense of belonging and community integration."*

Gender emerges as a crucial determinant in patterns of social integration. Female teachers demonstrate greater access to community networks, particularly through gender-specific social gatherings. One participant's account illustrates this phenomenon: *"Regular participation in women's gatherings facilitates social integration and community acceptance."*

The analysis also reveals the temporal impact of historical teacher-community relationships on current educational dynamics. Previous negative experiences significantly influence contemporary teacher-community relations, as evidenced by one participant's observation regarding pre-existing conflicts and their ongoing impact on community trust.

Examination of leisure patterns reveals differentiated approaches to professional-personal life integration. While some participants demonstrate limited social engagement through solitary activities, others exhibit more integrated patterns of community participation, particularly aligned with seasonal community activities and natural environments.

These findings demonstrate that rural teaching encompasses complex professional and sociocultural dimensions, with teacher adaptation significantly influenced by gender dynamics, cultural alignment, and spatial relationships between educational facilities and community centers. These findings suggest that successful rural teaching requires navigation of multiple social, cultural, and geographical factors beyond traditional pedagogical competencies.

After establishing the general patterns of teachers' rural life experiences, we now turn to a detailed examination of how teachers manage their basic needs and develop social integration strategies in rural settings. This aspect of the findings is particularly significant as it reveals the practical challenges and adaptive strategies that teachers employ in their daily lives. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of resource procurement methods and their implications for teachers' professional and personal adaptation to rural contexts. Table 3 presents the systematic categorization of resource acquisition methods among participants.

The data indicates that the majority of participants primarily employ

Table 3
Rural Teachers' Basic Needs and Social Integration Patterns.

Main Categories	Subcategories
Resource Acquisition	• Self-procurement • Community assistance • External networks
Housing and Community Integration	• Local support systems • Housing location impacts • Physical isolation • Infrastructure access
Social Interaction Patterns	• Spousal adaptation challenges • Community event participation • Cultural activities • Traditional gatherings • Seasonal social activities
Gender-Specific Integration	• Women's gatherings • Gender-based social networks • Traditional gender roles • Gender-specific community access
Professional Authority Relations	• Community-initiated interactions • Professional boundaries • Leadership roles • Educational influence

self-reliant procurement strategies for basic necessities. When direct procurement proves challenging, participants report utilizing community resources, including assistance from village transportation services or local residents traveling to urban centers.

Observational data reveals that research sites are predominantly located in regions characterized by continental climate patterns, particularly exposed to severe winter conditions in Anatolia. These conditions necessitate strategic planning for basic needs procurement, as evidenced by one participant's statement: *"We buy extra supplies to avoid difficulties when roads are closed"*. The analysis indicates significant transportation disruptions during winter months, compounded by limited transportation infrastructure across villages and the absence of basic commercial establishments.

Community support emerges as a crucial resource, particularly during infrastructure challenges. As one participant elaborated: *"We also ask villagers, and they bring what we need. For instance, when our school had no water, the villagers would bring water in containers. They occasionally send us traditional bread, cheese, and yogurt"*. Additionally, participants report specific strategies for managing perishable items: *"We face challenges with fresh bread. We buy extra and store it in the freezer"*.

The analysis reveals significant implications of housing arrangements on professional integration. Teacher housing, typically located outside village centers, substantially impacts community relations and communication patterns. This spatial separation creates particular challenges for teachers' spouses, as evidenced by one participant's detailed account: *"Due to the school's location outside the village, our neighborly relations are weak. Not many people from the village come to visit. My spouse feels isolated because they can't go to the village easily. They struggle due to the lack of neighbors. They want us to request a transfer as soon as possible"*.

The data reveals diverse patterns of social engagement within the community. Some participants actively participate in community life, as illustrated by one teacher's approach: *"I try my best to visit their homes. I always accept every invitation. This extends to participation in significant community events: 'We visit houses of condolence.'"*

Cultural alignment significantly influences social integration, as demonstrated by one participant's reflection: *"We brew traditional tea together. We even participate in folk dances in the schoolyard. I embrace it. These are my people, my society, people of my culture. They're not strangers to me"*.

The analysis reveals distinct gender-based patterns of social integration, particularly evident in female teachers' experiences. One female participant described regular participation in gender-specific gatherings: *"Women gather on Friday evenings. They invite me to these gatherings. I usually attend. Sometimes they visit me, and I host them"*. This pattern suggests the persistence of traditional gender-based social structures in rural Turkish communities.

A significant finding emerges regarding the nature of teacher-community interactions. The data indicates that most social interactions are initiated by community members rather than teachers,

suggesting a potential limitation in professional integration. This dynamic may impact teachers' perceived authority within the community, potentially affecting their ability to function as community leaders and influence local educational attitudes. The analysis demonstrates that teachers' experiences and meaning-making processes regarding rural teaching are significantly influenced by: [Fig. 1](#)

These findings demonstrate that rural teaching encompasses complex patterns of resource management and social integration, significantly influenced by structural, cultural, and gender-based factors. The data suggests that successful adaptation to rural teaching contexts requires not only professional competence but also the ability to navigate complex social and cultural dynamics while managing practical challenges of rural life. [Caption. 1](#)

Following the analysis of basic needs and resource procurement patterns, it is essential to examine how teachers integrate into daily village life. This aspect of rural teaching experience provides crucial insights into the social and cultural dimensions of teachers' professional lives. While the previous findings highlighted the practical challenges of maintaining daily life in rural settings, the following analysis reveals the complex dynamics of teachers' social integration and community participation patterns. [Table 4](#)

The data indicates that a substantial number of participants demonstrate limited integration into daily village life. This pattern is attributed to several structural and cultural factors, including the distant location of schools relative to village centers, demanding agricultural work schedules of villagers, and communication barriers. One participant articulates this challenge: *"We generally cannot participate in their daily lives. The work system in the village starts early in the morning and continues until late at night. We cannot participate due to their work schedules"*

The analysis reveals that some participants engage in community life through social visits and ceremonial events. However, this engagement is often characterized by its reactive nature, as evidenced by one participant's observation: *"It doesn't happen often. The school is somewhat outside the village. We can only join them during weddings and funerals"*. [Caption 2](#)

A particularly significant finding emerges regarding teachers who originate from similar cultural contexts. These participants demonstrate more active engagement in community life, as evidenced by their statements: *"I help villagers with their livestock. I make home visits" and "I go help those who have construction work"*.

The analysis indicates that teachers who have prior experience with rural life demonstrate higher levels of community integration, participating in various agricultural, construction, and animal husbandry activities. This integration appears to be facilitated by their cultural familiarity and previous life experiences with similar activities. The data suggests that teachers appointed to regions culturally similar to their origins show greater involvement in community activities and offer more comprehensive support to villagers, compared to those from different cultural backgrounds.

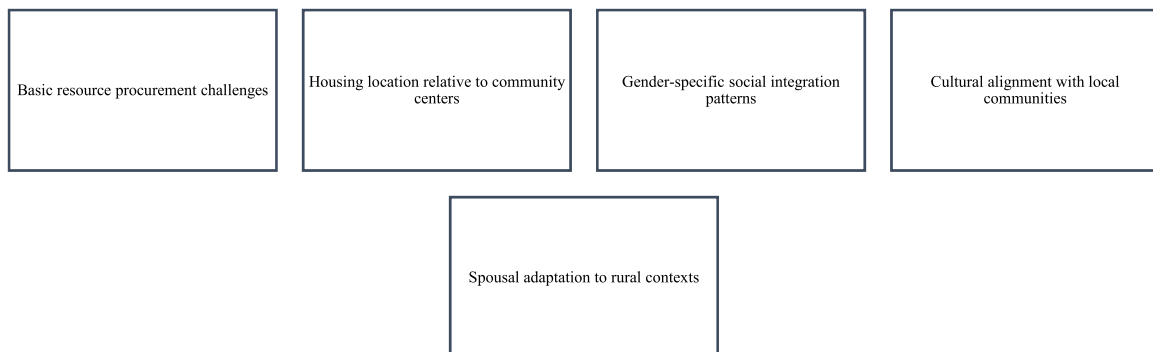


Fig. 1. Teachers' experiences and meaning-making processes regarding rural teaching.



Caption 1. Teacher Housing in Ağrı Hamur Aşağı Gözlüce Village.

Table 4
Teachers’ Integration Patterns into Daily Village Life.

Main Categories	Subcategories
Non-Participation Patterns	• School location barriers • Work schedule conflicts • Communication barriers
Social Event Participation	• Physical isolation factors • Social visits • Ceremonial events • Village gatherings • Community rituals
Community Assistance and Integration	• Agricultural support • Construction assistance • Animal husbandry help • Home visits
Cultural Alignment Factors	• Cultural background influence • Prior rural life experience • Local knowledge integration • Community familiarity

The findings suggest that teachers’ experiences of integration into village life significantly influence their understanding of rural teaching. The data indicates a tendency toward social isolation or perceived isolation, particularly among teachers from different cultural backgrounds. This pattern has important implications for teacher

appointment policies, suggesting that cultural alignment between teachers and their assigned communities might enhance community integration and professional effectiveness. As shown in Fig. 2, the analysis demonstrates that successful integration into rural teaching contexts extends beyond professional competence to encompass:

These findings suggest that teacher preparation and appointment policies might benefit from considering cultural background and rural life experience as significant factors in rural teaching success.

While the previous analysis explored teachers’ participation patterns in daily village life, it is equally important to examine the quality and nature of relationships that develop between teachers and community members. Understanding these relationship dynamics provides crucial insights into how teachers navigate their professional roles while establishing meaningful connections within the rural community. The following analysis examines the complex patterns of teacher-community relationships and their implications for rural education. Table 5

The data reveals a dichotomy in teacher-community relationships, with participants demonstrating either distant or intimate relationships. Notably, some teachers maintain varying levels of intimacy with different community members, as evidenced by one participant’s observation: “Of course, the same level of intimacy isn’t established with everyone. There are people I’m very close with, and others whom I just greet in passing”. The analysis indicates that teachers’ relationship management is influenced by previous experiences in the community. One participant



Caption 2. View of Village from Tercan Başbudak Village School.

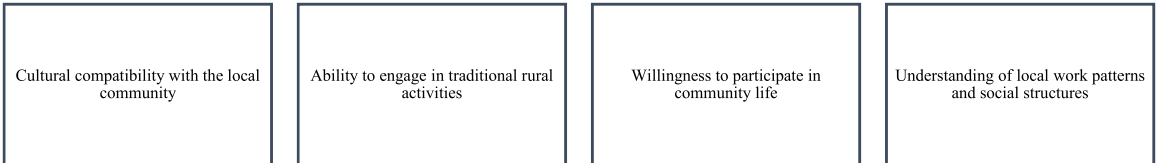


Fig. 2. Successful integration into rural teaching contexts.

Table 5
Teacher-Community Relationship Dynamics.

Main Categories	Subcategories
Relationship Patterns	• Distant relationships • Intimate relationships • Mixed interaction levels
Professional Boundary Management	• Historical influence on boundaries • Communication strategies • Professional distance maintenance • Relationship limitations
Community Attitudes	• Educational engagement levels • Support patterns • Resistance to involvement
Historical Factors	• School participation • Past negative experiences • Parent-teacher conflicts • Legacy effects • Trust issues
Cultural and Gender Influences	• Cultural background alignment • Gender-based interaction patterns • Regional familiarity • Integration levels

articulates this dynamic:

"I have good communication with them since I knew most of them before. However, relationships are limited. I actually try to maintain some distance. The reason is that I heard about previous teachers playing games in their homes. I keep my relationships distant to avoid similar situations"

The analysis reveals significant challenges in community attitudes toward education. As one participant notes: "They maintain distance from school and teachers. They mostly have an attitude of 'do whatever you want, just don't ask anything from us'. This perspective is further evidenced in varying levels of community engagement, with some teachers reporting positive interactions: "They try to be involved. They visit me occasionally. They're always supportive. They definitely help me when I'm doing something at school"

The data indicates that historical teacher-community interactions significantly influence current relationships. One participant describes this legacy: "Unfortunately, there were negative experiences before me. There was a kind of parent-teacher conflict. Some unclear situations occurred". The analysis reveals that teachers who work in regions similar to their cultural background or female teachers demonstrate higher levels of community integration. This is particularly evident in home-visiting patterns and social engagement. However, community participation often remains limited, as illustrated by one participant's observation: "They have no desire to be involved in our lives. Those who are forced to come to parent-teacher meetings do not come to school and interact with us".

These findings suggest that teacher-community relationships are shaped by multiple factors including historical experiences, professional boundary management, cultural alignment, and gender dynamics. The data indicates that successful relationship building requires careful navigation of these factors while maintaining professional standards and community engagement.

After examining the patterns and dynamics of teacher-community relationships, it is now crucial to understand how teachers allocate and manage their time outside of school hours. This aspect provides valuable insights into teachers' daily routines and their strategies for balancing professional responsibilities with personal life in rural settings. Table 6 presents the various ways teachers spend their time beyond formal teaching hours, revealing patterns that further illuminate their integration into rural community life.

The analysis reveals that teachers predominantly spend their time outside school hours in domestic settings, engaging in routine household activities and pursuing individual leisure activities. One participant's statement exemplifies this pattern: "I generally spend time at home. I try to pass time by reading books and taking evening walks". The data indicates varying levels of community engagement, with some participants actively maintaining social connections. As one participant describes:

Table 6
Time Allocation Patterns Outside School Hours.

Main Categories	Subcategories
Domestic Activities	• Daily household routines • Home-based leisure time • Indoor hobbies
Social Engagement	• Time with colleagues • Community interaction • Parent visits • Community assistance
Intellectual and Physical Activities	• Reading • Nature walks • Seasonal outdoor activities
Cultural Integration	• Family traditions • Community celebrations • Local customs participation • Seasonal community work
Recreational Activities	• Individual leisure pursuits • Group activities • Nature-based recreation • Seasonal variations in activities

"We usually go to villagers for tea. We go with fellow teachers. Since this is a central location for bussed education, we can visit other villages too".

The analysis reveals that teachers from similar cultural backgrounds demonstrate more comprehensive community integration. One participant's experience illustrates this pattern: "I usually spend my time at home. Since I have many siblings, I visit relatives a lot. When I leave the village where I work late, I usually like to visit the parents or talk to the village people on the street. If they have weddings or funerals, I definitely attend them". The data indicates significant seasonal variations in teachers' activities and community engagement. One participant describes this seasonal pattern:

"I'm usually at home in winter. I do handicrafts or read books. Sometimes I visit villagers. But when the snow melts and spring comes, I usually find myself in the meadows (natural environments). I love nature. That's why I constantly go for walks. During gardening season, I help the village women in their gardens. We have picnics together".

The analysis suggests that teachers' time allocation patterns reflect a complex negotiation between professional responsibilities and personal life management. While some participants actively seek community integration through various activities, others maintain more isolated routines, primarily engaging in individual activities such as reading and nature walks.

These findings indicate that teachers' time allocation outside school hours is influenced by multiple factors including cultural background, seasonal conditions, and individual preferences for social engagement. The data suggests that while some teachers successfully integrate into community life through various activities, many experience a disconnection from community life, primarily oscillating between school and teacher housing. This pattern has significant implications for understanding the full scope of rural teaching experience and its impact on teachers' professional identity and community integration.

The comprehensive analysis of rural teachers' experiences reveals complex interactions between professional duties, personal life management, and community integration. The findings demonstrate that teachers' experiences in rural settings are significantly shaped by four interconnected dimensions: resource management strategies, community participation patterns, relationship dynamics, and time allocation practices. Teachers develop various adaptive strategies for managing basic needs while navigating cultural and social boundaries in their professional roles. The data indicates that successful rural teaching experience extends beyond classroom competence, requiring sophisticated negotiation of community relationships and cultural dynamics. Particularly significant is the influence of teachers' cultural backgrounds and gender on their integration patterns, with those sharing cultural similarities with their assigned communities demonstrating more comprehensive integration. The analysis reveals that physical factors,

such as school location and housing arrangements, substantially impact teachers' ability to establish meaningful community connections. Additionally, historical teacher-community interactions create lasting effects on current relationships, influencing both professional effectiveness and personal adaptation. Time allocation patterns further reflect the complex balance teachers must maintain between professional responsibilities and personal life, often resulting in varying degrees of community integration. These findings collectively suggest that rural teaching encompasses multiple layers of professional and personal adaptation, where success depends not only on pedagogical skills but also on teachers' ability to navigate complex social, cultural, and practical challenges while maintaining professional boundaries.

4.1. Gender-specific dimensions of rural teaching experience

While our overall analysis revealed significant impacts of cultural alignment and infrastructure location on teachers' meaning-making processes, a closer examination of female teachers' experiences uncovered distinct patterns warranting dedicated attention. The phenomenological accounts of our female participants (f1, f3, f6, f9) revealed unique experiences shaped by gender-specific social boundaries and cultural expectations within village contexts. Female teachers demonstrated distinctive patterns in community access and integration. All four female participants reported regular participation in women-specific cultural gatherings, creating pathways for community integration unavailable to their male counterparts. As participant f3 elaborated: "The women's Friday gatherings provide invaluable insights into family dynamics and children's home environments. These spaces allow me to understand parents' educational perspectives in ways that formal meetings cannot achieve." This gender-specific access facilitated deeper understanding of community values and educational attitudes, ultimately enhancing pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, female teachers reported experiencing different professional boundary expectations. While male teachers expressed concerns about maintaining professional distance to avoid compromising community respect, female teachers navigated more complex expectations regarding their visibility in public spaces. Participant f9 noted: "I carefully balance my professional obligations with community expectations about appropriate behavior for women. This requires constant negotiation of when and how I appear in village spaces." This negotiation constituted a significant dimension of female teachers' meaning-making processes regarding their professional identity. The physical isolation of teacher housing affected female participants differently than their male counterparts. Female teachers expressed heightened concerns about security and social integration when residing in isolated school housing. Participant f1 described: "Living outside the village center creates specific challenges for me as a woman. The isolation affects not only my professional integration but also my sense of personal safety and wellbeing." This finding suggests that infrastructure planning may have gender-differentiated impacts that should inform housing policies for rural teachers. These gender-specific dimensions demonstrate how female teachers construct professional meaning through navigating intersecting cultural, social, and structural constraints. Their experiences highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches to rural teacher preparation and support, acknowledging the distinct challenges and opportunities that shape female educators' professional trajectories in village contexts.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of rural teachers' experiences through a phenomenological lens provides significant insights into their professional and personal adaptation processes in village schools. The findings demonstrate that while historical challenges regarding basic needs procurement have largely diminished, teachers continue to face complex challenges in social integration and professional practice. Before proceeding with a detailed discussion of our findings, it is important to

conceptually clarify two related yet distinct phenomena that emerged in our analysis.

Our findings necessitate a conceptual clarification regarding two related but distinct phenomena observed in rural teachers' experiences: cultural fit and cultural adaptation. Cultural fit, as conceptualized in the educational literature, refers to the inherent alignment between a teacher's pre-existing cultural background and the community where they teach (Reininger, 2012). This construct emphasizes congruence between personal and community values, communication patterns, and social expectations that exists prior to placement. As Herzog and Pittman (2020) suggest, this alignment facilitates immediate understanding of community dynamics without requiring substantial personal adjustment. In contrast, cultural adaptation represents the process through which teachers modify their behaviors, perspectives, and practices to accommodate the cultural norms of their assigned communities (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). This dynamic process involves conscious effort to bridge cultural gaps through deliberate learning and behavioral adjustments. Abdelazim Ahmed (2017) characterizes this adaptation as an active negotiation between professional identity and community expectations, requiring significant cognitive and emotional resources. While both constructs involve teacher-community cultural relationships, they differ fundamentally in their temporal dimensions and agency implications. Cultural fit represents a static, pre-existing condition of alignment, while adaptation constitutes an ongoing process of negotiation and change. Our findings align more closely with the cultural fit construct, as teachers who originated from similar cultural contexts to their assigned communities demonstrated more positive meaning-making patterns and deeper integration without reporting significant adaptation processes. As participant f7 expressed: "I didn't need to adapt; these are my people, my culture." This finding extends Reininger's (2012) work on cultural familiarity by demonstrating that pre-existing cultural alignment not only influences retention decisions but fundamentally shapes how rural teachers construct meaning from their professional experiences. While all teachers developed adaptation strategies for managing practical challenges, cultural meaning-making processes appeared more significantly influenced by pre-existing cultural alignment than by adaptive capacities, suggesting that teacher placement policies might benefit from considering cultural background as a significant factor in rural teaching success. With this conceptual clarification in mind, we can now examine how our findings regarding resource management patterns, social integration, and professional practice reflect the significance of cultural fit in rural teaching contexts.

"Recent international research corroborates our findings while adding global context. Studies from South Africa (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019) and Vietnam (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020) confirm that cultural alignment significantly impacts teacher integration and effectiveness. Our findings regarding gender dynamics align with recent research from Niger (Murugaiah, 2023), which demonstrates how female teachers navigate traditional community structures. Additionally, our observations about infrastructure's impact on community integration parallel findings from Kenya (Ogawa, 2024), where physical resources significantly influence teacher retention and community engagement.

The complex relationship between professional identity and community integration observed in our study reflects patterns documented in recent research across developing nations. Studies from rural China (Tang, 2018) demonstrate how community integration impacts teachers' subjective well-being, while research from Pakistan (Barrs, 2005) highlights the crucial role of community organizations in supporting teacher motivation and professional development."

Resource management patterns reveal that teachers have developed sophisticated strategies for meeting their basic needs, particularly in response to seasonal challenges and geographical isolation. However, the location of teacher housing, typically outside village centers, creates significant barriers to community integration and professional effectiveness. This physical separation contributes to a pattern of social isolation that extends beyond mere geographical distance.

The study reveals that social integration is deeply influenced by teachers' cultural backgrounds and gender. Teachers who share cultural similarities with their assigned communities demonstrate more comprehensive integration patterns, participating in both formal and informal community activities. Gender emerges as a crucial factor, particularly evident in how female teachers can access certain community spaces and relationships that remain closed to their male counterparts. These integration patterns are further complicated by historical teacher-community relationships, which continue to influence current interactions and trust-building opportunities.

Professional practice in rural settings appears constrained by multiple factors. Educational planning with families remains limited, often reactive rather than proactive, and primarily focused on addressing immediate academic concerns. Teachers' engagement with the community frequently depends on invitations rather than teacher-initiated interactions, suggesting a degree of professional hesitation or uncertainty about appropriate boundaries.

Time management patterns reveal that teachers predominantly confine themselves to domestic spaces during non-school hours, with limited community engagement. While some teachers, particularly those with cultural familiarity, engage in community activities and social visits, many experience a form of self-imposed isolation. This isolation appears more pronounced during winter months, though some teachers develop seasonal strategies for community engagement, particularly during warmer seasons.

The findings indicate that successful rural teaching requires more than pedagogical competence; it demands sophisticated navigation of social, cultural, and practical challenges. Teachers must balance professional boundaries with community integration while managing practical challenges of rural life. The evidence suggests that current preparation and support systems may not adequately address these complex demands of rural teaching.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to our understanding of rural teaching experiences, particularly regarding teacher adaptation and community integration. While our study demonstrates improved capacity for basic needs management compared to historical accounts (Oktay, 1991; Çelikten et al., 2005), the findings align with Burton et al.'s (2013) observation that rural teachers continue to face complex challenges in community integration and professional practice beyond resource management.

The study's findings regarding teacher-community relationships are in parallel with international literature. While Dağdeviren (2009) noted Turkish rural teachers' tendency to limit themselves to teaching duties, Monk (2007) identified similar patterns globally, suggesting this limitation stems from structural and cultural barriers rather than personal choice. This understanding is particularly significant given the emphasis on teaching as a profession requiring broad social engagement (Özsoy et al., 2010; Herzog and Pittman, 2020).

Our findings on the impact of cultural alignment between teachers and communities extend Anılan et al., (2015) work on rural teacher adaptation strategies. Reininger's (2012) research on teachers' location preferences supports this finding, demonstrating how cultural familiarity significantly influences teacher integration and retention. Furthermore, Barley and Beesley (2007) found that successful rural schools often feature teachers who effectively navigate local cultural dynamics.

The observed impact of school location and teacher housing on community integration reflects patterns documented by Cowen et al. (2012) in their study of Appalachian schools. Their research identified infrastructure location as a critical factor in teacher retention and community engagement, supporting our findings about the significance of physical proximity to community integration.

Our findings concerning gender dynamics in rural communities reflect broader patterns of gender segregation in Turkish villages, which represent a complex intersection of educational practices, employment patterns, and societal expectations. Research shows that traditional

gender roles continue to shape educational settings, particularly in rural areas, where gender imbalances often stem from deep societal perceptions tied to domestic responsibilities (Özer, 2016). Studies of teacher candidates reveal a prevalence of traditional gender perspectives, with men typically adhering more strongly to these norms (Taşkın and Nayır, 2021). Despite expansions in higher education, gender segregation in Turkey remains relatively unchanged (Cin et al., 2021), with traditional structures continuing to influence educational and occupational choices (Gedikli, 2020). The literature emphasizes the need for gender awareness in teacher education to transform these traditional perceptions (Şanlı and Karakuş, 2023), while acknowledging how deeply embedded cultural values continue to challenge gender equality initiatives despite historical reforms (Atay, 2023). This persistent influence of gender aligns with more recent work by Watt et al. (2014), who found that gender continues to shape professional engagement patterns in educational settings.

The limited educational planning with families observed in our study parallels findings from Miller and Youngs (2021), who identified similar patterns of restricted parent-teacher interaction across different contexts. Ulferts (2016) further supports this finding, noting that successful community integration often requires intentional strategies for family engagement.

Our findings on teacher adaptation and community integration contribute to a growing body of international research on rural education in developing contexts. Recent studies from Africa (Mitchell et al., 2020) and Asia (Tang, 2018) demonstrate similar patterns in how teachers construct professional meaning through community engagement. The challenges of physical infrastructure and cultural alignment observed in our study parallel findings from South Africa (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019) and Vietnam (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020), suggesting common patterns in rural teacher experiences across developing nations. These international parallels strengthen our understanding of rural teaching as a complex phenomenon requiring comprehensive support systems that address both practical and existential challenges. A more detailed examination of these international parallels reveals both important similarities and contextual differences that merit further discussion.

Our findings demonstrate both compelling parallels and notable distinctions when compared with rural education research from South Africa and Vietnam. Regarding similarities, our observations about cultural alignment's impact on teacher integration echo Du Plessis and Mestry's (2019) findings from South African rural contexts, where teachers with cultural familiarity demonstrated significantly higher community engagement and professional satisfaction. Similarly, our gender-differentiated findings align with Karlidag-Dennis et al.'s (2020) research in Northwestern Vietnam's ethnic minority regions, where female teachers developed distinct strategies for navigating gendered community spaces. Thematically, our identification of housing location as a critical factor in community integration parallels South African studies showing how infrastructure placement significantly impacts teacher retention and community engagement (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). However, important contextual differences emerge in comparative analysis. While Vietnamese teachers in ethnic minority regions navigate complex linguistic barriers requiring specialized adaptations (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020), Turkish rural teachers in our study faced primarily cultural rather than linguistic integration challenges. Furthermore, unlike South African contexts where historical racial segregation continues to influence rural teacher experiences (Mukeredzi, 2014), Turkish rural teaching is shaped more by regional cultural variations and gender norms than by explicit historical segregation policies. Another distinctive feature emerges in professional preparation approaches: while Ledger et al.'s (2021) comparative analysis of rural teacher preparation in Australia, South Africa, and Mexico emphasizes formalized rural practicum experiences, Turkish teacher preparation largely lacks such structured rural-specific components. Additionally, South African rural teachers report significantly

greater material resource constraints than observed in our Turkish context (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). These comparative insights enhance understanding of rural teaching as a globally shared yet contextually differentiated phenomenon, suggesting that while certain aspects of rural teaching experience transcend national boundaries, effective support systems must remain attentive to unique historical, cultural, and structural dimensions of each context. While these international comparisons provide valuable cross-cultural insights, equally important are the economic development disparities within our research context, which create distinct conditions for rural teaching experiences across different regions of Turkey.

The seven provinces in which this study was conducted—Erzincan, Erzurum, Bayburt, Ağrı, Iğdır, Şanlıurfa, and Çanakkale—represent significantly different levels of economic development, allowing for comparative analysis of how socioeconomic contexts influence rural teaching experiences. According to Turkey's Regional Development Agency classifications, Çanakkale stands as the most economically developed province in our sample, with diversified economic activities including tourism, agriculture, and small-scale industry (Kavruk et al., 2012). The Eastern provinces (Erzincan, Erzurum, Bayburt, Ağrı, and Iğdır) fall within Turkey's less economically developed regions, characterized by higher poverty rates, limited infrastructure, and predominantly agricultural economies (Abdelazim Ahmed, 2017). Şanlıurfa, located in Southeastern Anatolia, represents an intermediate position with substantial agricultural production but persistent socioeconomic challenges (Kurt, 2006). Our phenomenological analysis revealed discernible patterns in teaching experiences across these economic contexts. Teachers in Çanakkale reported significantly fewer resource procurement challenges compared to their counterparts in Eastern provinces, particularly regarding transportation and essential supplies. As one participant from Erzurum noted: "Basic supplies that teachers in western regions take for granted require extensive planning and community support networks here." Infrastructure development disparities emerged as particularly significant in teacher housing quality and location, with more economically developed regions typically offering housing with better community integration potential. This finding extends Cowen et al.'s (2012) research by demonstrating how regional economic development mediates the relationship between infrastructure quality and community integration. Similarly, community educational attitudes appeared influenced by regional economic conditions, with teachers in more economically developed regions reporting higher levels of parental engagement with formal education. However, cultural integration patterns showed less direct correlation with economic development levels; rather, they were more significantly influenced by cultural alignment between teachers and communities regardless of regional economic status. This comparative analysis suggests that while certain aspects of rural teaching experience are directly mediated by regional economic development (particularly resource management and infrastructure quality), other dimensions (such as cultural integration and meaning-making processes) transcend economic determinants, highlighting the complex interplay between material conditions and sociocultural factors in shaping rural teaching experiences. Having examined both international comparisons and regional economic variations, we now turn to the theoretical and practical implications of our findings for rural teacher preparation and support systems.

These findings have several theoretical and practical implications. First, they suggest a need to reconceptualize rural teacher preparation to include explicit attention to cultural adaptation and community integration strategies. Second, they indicate that infrastructure planning should consider not just practical necessity but also social integration potential. Third, they highlight the need for differentiated support systems that recognize the varying challenges faced by teachers based on their cultural background and gender.

The study's limitations include its focus on a specific geographical region and cultural context. Future research might explore how these patterns manifest in different cultural contexts or how technological

advancements might bridge physical isolation while maintaining professional boundaries. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insight into how teacher-community relationships evolve over time.

6. Recommendations and implications

This study of rural teachers' experiences in Turkish villages has significant implications for policy, practice, and research in rural education. Drawing from our findings, we propose several recommendations that could enhance rural teaching effectiveness and teacher retention in developing contexts. These recommendations should be considered within broader international frameworks for educational development.

The findings of this study directly align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2023). Our research particularly supports Target 4.c, which emphasizes the importance of increasing the supply of qualified teachers, especially in marginalized communities. The complex challenges of cultural alignment, gender dynamics, and infrastructure isolation identified in our study highlight critical dimensions of rural teacher experience that must be addressed to achieve SDG4 targets in developing contexts. Specifically, our findings regarding the impact of cultural alignment support SDG4's emphasis on context-responsive education, while our gender-specific findings address Target 4.5's focus on eliminating gender disparities in education. To advance these goals, we propose several policy recommendations: First, teacher preparation programs should be redesigned to include specific rural education modules addressing cultural navigation and community integration skills (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). Second, infrastructure planning should prioritize teacher housing locations that facilitate community integration while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, thereby supporting Target 4.a's emphasis on safe and inclusive learning environments (Cowen et al., 2012). Third, teacher placement policies should incorporate cultural background as a consideration in assignments, potentially enhancing both teacher retention and educational effectiveness in rural contexts (Reininger, 2012). Fourth, gender-responsive support systems should be developed to address the unique challenges faced by female rural teachers, advancing Target 4.5's gender equality focus (Thien et al., 2023). Finally, rural education policies should promote digitally-enabled professional learning communities to mitigate isolation while preserving cultural responsiveness (Castro et al., 2022). These evidence-based recommendations provide a framework for advancing SDG4's inclusivity objectives in rural education contexts, acknowledging that equitable education requires attention to both material resources and the complex sociocultural dimensions of teaching experience. Building on these SDG4-aligned principles, we now propose specific modifications to teacher preparation programs and professional development systems.

Our findings suggest that teacher preparation programs need substantial modification to address the unique challenges of rural education. While current programs focus primarily on pedagogical skills, they should be expanded to include specific preparation for rural contexts, particularly regarding cultural integration and community engagement. This aligns with evidence from other developing contexts where teacher preparation has been successfully adapted to rural needs.

Policy implications emerge regarding infrastructure planning and teacher placement. The physical location of teacher housing significantly impacts community integration and professional effectiveness. Educational authorities should prioritize housing placement that facilitates community engagement while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Additionally, teacher appointment policies should consider cultural alignment between teachers and communities, as our findings indicate this significantly influences integration success.

Professional development systems require restructuring to support rural teachers effectively. Current support mechanisms often fail to

address the complex social and cultural challenges teachers face in rural settings. We recommend developing contextualized professional development programs that specifically address cultural adaptation, community engagement strategies, and effective boundary management in rural settings.

For future research, we suggest three priority areas. First, longitudinal studies examining the evolution of teacher-community relationships would provide valuable insights into successful integration patterns. Second, comparative studies across different rural contexts in developing countries could illuminate effective support strategies. Third, intervention studies testing various approaches to teacher preparation and support would contribute practical knowledge to the field.

These recommendations acknowledge the resource constraints common in developing contexts while proposing realistic improvements to current systems. Implementation should be gradual and context-sensitive, with regular evaluation to ensure effectiveness.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

KAŞKAYA Alper: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **ÜNÜ İhsan:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **KILIÇ Mehmet Fatih:** Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Claude 3.5 Sonnet in order to improve language and readability. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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