



Behind the Quiet Walls: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Social Isolation of Shy and Introverted Learners in Norala District

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ABSTRACT

Shy and introverted learners in Norala District often experience social isolation that hinders classroom participation, peer collaboration, and emotional well-being, ultimately affecting academic performance and school adjustment. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to describe and interpret the lived experiences

and essence of social isolation among these learners, providing contextually grounded insights to inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health supports. Data analysis revealed that learners experienced emotional challenges, including anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and feelings of loneliness, often exacerbated by limited peer support and exclusion from classroom interactions. Despite these challenges, learners employed a variety of coping mechanisms to navigate social isolation. Classroom-based strategies, such as small group activities, structured collaborative projects, and differentiated instruction, fostered inclusion, engagement, and confidence. Peer interaction and trust-building activities encouraged social participation, while teacher guidance, one-on-one support, and emotional scaffolding facilitated gradual adjustment and self-efficacy. Additionally, learners engaged in independent and reflective activities, such as hobbies, reading, and arts-based tasks, to regulate emotions and maintain meaningful engagement in safe personal spaces. Findings highlight that effective support for socially isolated learners requires intentional scaffolding from teachers, collaboration with parents, inclusive and structured classroom interventions, and opportunities for both social and independent engagement. By addressing emotional, social, and academic dimensions simultaneously, these strategies can mitigate the negative effects of social isolation and empower learners to develop resilience, confidence, and a sense of belonging within the school community.

Keywords: *emotional resilience, peer collaboration, inclusive teaching, self-efficacy*



INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In today's educational sphere, shy and introverted learners hide their social reticence behind the classroom door, resulting in reduced participation, missed peer-learning opportunities, and emotional strain that affects school adjustment and academic progress. International research indicates that shyness, social anxiety, and prolonged social isolation are associated with poorer classroom participation, language- and test-performance decrements, and elevated psychosocial difficulties—problems that were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic when many learners experienced extended social deprivation. These converging concerns call for in-depth, experience-centered inquiry into how shy and introverted learners live and make meaning of social withdrawal in school spaces.

Internationally, scholarly work in psychology and education shows that shyness and social anxiety negatively affect classroom engagement and may be linked with lower academic attainment and language performance (Copeland et al., 2021). Systematic reviews also document effective school-based interventions but note variability in outcomes across settings and ages (Spence et al., 2020).

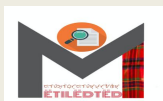
Moreover, the pandemic spotlighted how prolonged social isolation harms children's and adolescents' mental health and learning, underscoring the need to understand lived experience—not only prevalence—to design context-sensitive supports (Loades et al., 2020). While intervention trials and quantitative prevalence studies are robust, fewer phenomenological studies deeply describe how shy/introverted learners themselves experience and interpret social isolation inside school contexts.

Recent Philippine studies document worrying trends in youth mental health and the emotional toll of pandemic-era isolation, with several examining loneliness, coping, and self-efficacy among students during the shift to remote/blended learning (Cervantes et al., 2021; Manalo & De Guzman, 2022). While these studies provide valuable statistical profiles, much of the research has emphasized prevalence, coping strategies, or outcomes of lockdowns rather than rich, phenomenological accounts of shy or introverted learners in classroom settings. However, there is limited qualitative, phenomenological exploration in Philippine settings that centers on shy learners' subjective experiences of social isolation and how those experiences shape school engagement and identity.

Research in South Central Mindanao, including studies on student resilience, self-efficacy, and the challenges of online/blended learning, highlights regional educational disruptions and the psychosocial effects of the pandemic (Gonzales et al., 2022; Santos & Villanueva, 2023).

These findings suggest local vulnerabilities and adaptive processes among learners. Regionally focused studies tend toward quantitative descriptions of coping or engagement; there is a paucity of phenomenological work that explores the lived, meaning-making processes of shy/introverted learners in the social ecology of Mindanao schools.

In South Cotabato, particularly the Norala District, is culturally diverse, with substantial Indigenous and rural learners (Phil Atlas, 2023). Local demographic and regional profiles document these communities' distinct social and educational contexts, yet peer-reviewed, in-depth qualitative research specifically on the social isolation of shy and introverted learners in Norala remains scarce.



However, the limited published, place-based phenomenological studies that examine how shy learners in these municipalities experience, interpret, and navigate social isolation within their schools and communities—leave an urgent local knowledge gap for culturally appropriate school practices and supports (Delos Santos & Natividad, 2024).

This study aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by addressing inclusivity and equitable learning—centering shy and introverted learners helps make classrooms more accessible and responsive to diverse learner needs—and with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), as social isolation and its psychological impacts affect learners' mental health and wellbeing (United Nations, 2023). Phenomenological insights can inform school-level interventions and policies that promote both inclusive learning.

The principal aim of this phenomenological inquiry was to describe and interpret the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that can inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

Research Questions

Generally, this study sought to describe and interpret the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that can inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

Specifically, this research problem revolved around understanding the following key questions:

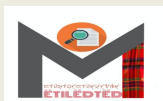
1. What are the lived experiences of shy and introverted learners in relation to social isolation in Norala District?
2. What are the factors and situations that contribute to learners' experiences of social isolation?
3. What coping mechanisms do learners employ when they feel socially isolated in school?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach was employed to describe and interpret the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that can inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

Phenomenological research interprets individuals' lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how they interpret these experiences. It assumes that individuals employ a universal structure or essence to derive meaning from their encounters. This research explores participants' emotions, perceptions, and beliefs to shed light on the fundamental essence of the phenomenon under investigation. An essential aspect of the phenomenological research design is the researcher's obligation to set aside any preconceived assumptions about the experience or phenomenon (Delve & Limpaecher, 2012).



Participants of the Study

The data below display the qualifications of the participants based on the criteria set by the researcher prior to the selection of qualified informants of the study.

1. Current Teaching Assignment – Must be a licensed teacher currently assigned in public elementary or secondary schools within **Norala District** during the school year 2025–2026, ensuring relevance to the study context.

2. Teaching Experience with Shy/Introverted Learners – Must have **at least two years of teaching experience** and direct exposure to shy and introverted learners, so that can provide meaningful insights about their classroom behaviors and social isolation.

3. Willingness to Participate – Must voluntarily agree to participate in the study, demonstrating openness to share lived experiences and reflections in interviews or focus group discussions.

4. Ability to Articulate Observations and Experiences – Must be able to communicate their perspectives clearly in either English or Filipino (or a local dialect), to ensure depth and richness in the qualitative data collection.

The study involved a total of fifteen (15) teachers in DepEd Norala District, Division of South Cotabato, who met the researcher's specified inclusion criteria.

Sampling Technique

During the conduct of this study, a Purposive Sampling Technique was intentionally utilized to carefully select fifteen (15) teachers in DepEd Norala District, Division of South Cotabato, who met the researcher's specified inclusion criteria.

Research Purposive sampling, alternately referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, constitutes a variant of non-probability sampling. Within this approach, researchers exercise judgment by selecting individuals from the survey population (Alchemer, 2021). This sampling requires that researchers possess prior knowledge of the objectives underpinning their study so as to effectively pinpoint and make contact with eligible participants through online survey platforms. Researchers resort to purposive sampling to a distinct subgroup of individuals, whereby all survey respondents are meticulously chosen based on their alignment with a specific demographic or criterion.

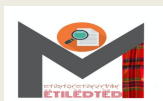
Research Instruments

In this study, a semi-structured interview functioned as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that can inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool were substantiated through a rigorous evaluation process conducted by a panel of in the development of relevant research instruments.

The findings were presented in a comprehensive report that outlines the key themes and insights derived from the data. This report included direct quotes from participants to illustrate important points and provide context for the findings. Visual aids such as charts, graphs, or tables may also present quantitative data.

Additionally, the researcher considered organizing a presentation or



seminar to disseminate the findings to relevant stakeholders, such as educators, policymakers, and community members involved in Indigenous education. It provided an opportunity to discuss the implications of the findings and explore potential strategies for addressing the challenges identified in the study.

This instrument's credibility and suitability were validated through a rigorous assessment process overseen by a panel of experts with specialized knowledge in developing pertinent research instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

To ensure the research's reliability, the researcher maintained a strict adherence to a predefined set of procedures. The primary objective of this study is to explore the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that could inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

In the initial phase, the researcher diligently sought formal authorization from both the Superintendent of DepEd-South Cotabato and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies (CGS). This authorization is essential to obtain the necessary permissions for the researcher to conduct the study, emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations.

Following this, a secondary authorization letter was sent to the District Supervisor, explicitly requesting access to the specific data required for this research. A meticulously crafted survey questionnaire was developed, evaluated, and administered to the targeted participants.

The researcher used purposive Sampling Technique to carefully select

elementary and secondary school teachers as participants in this study. Strictly adhering to the EWMCI-Research Ethics Committee, the researcher facilitated face to face interviews and facilitated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

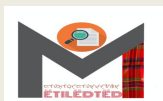
Flow Process and Data Gathering Procedure

The data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using the thematic analysis approach. This approach is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation. See the diagram below:

Data Analysis

In this study, which centered on uncovering the lived experiences and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights to inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports, a content or thematic analysis approach was employed to examine the collected data. This methodology, as described by Flick (2014), Ngag (2023), and Braun (2009), involved the systematic categorization of textual components, including statements, phrases, and words, into organized groupings or categories. These categories were either derived from established frameworks or custom-developed to align with the study's specific objectives.

To execute this analytical process, a series of essential steps were diligently followed. Initially, all data sources, such as interview transcripts, notes from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and relevant documents, were meticulously organized and prepared for analysis, ensuring systematic arrangement and accessibility.



Subsequently, the researcher deeply engaged with the data by conducting a thorough review of interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process gained a comprehensive understanding of the content and context embedded within the collected information.

The third step involved initiating a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes captured essential concepts, ideas, or themes related to the narratives of teachers' professional development and its outcomes on teaching effectiveness. Following coding, the identified codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance, establishing an initial structure for organizing the data.

Next, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes were reviewed and refined. The researchers ensured the consistency and clarity of these themes, making necessary adjustments. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive name that succinctly represented the content it encapsulated, facilitating easy identification and interpretation. Relevant data excerpts, such as quotes or segments extracted from interviews and FGDs, were selected and associated with the respective themes, serving as supporting evidence.

Finally, the thematic analysis extended beyond surface-level identification. The researchers interpreted the meaning and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives, seeking patterns, connections, and variations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' narratives.

This meticulous and structured process enabled the researchers to systematically explore and comprehend the lived experiences and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners

in Norala District, providing insights that could inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

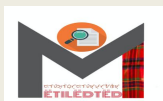
Scope and Limitations

This study focused on exploring the lived experiences of shy and introverted learners in Norala District to understand how social isolation affects their academic and personal development. Specifically, it sought to capture the voices of selected elementary and secondary students who identify as shy or introverted and have experienced varying degrees of withdrawal or limited social interaction within the classroom setting.

Conducted during the school year 2025–2026 in selected schools across Norala District, the research employed a phenomenological design to deeply examine participants' perspectives through in-depth interviews and reflective narratives. The study was delimited to learners officially enrolled in DepEd schools within the district, excluding those outside the target population or those unwilling to participate. By focusing on this group, the research aims to shed light on the underlying reasons, challenges, and coping strategies of socially isolated learners, providing insights that may guide teachers, school administrators, and policymakers in creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In education, shy and introverted learners often carry their social reticence behind the classroom, which can translate into reduced participation, missed peer-learning opportunities, and emotional strain that affects school adjustment and academic progress.



In this study, qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach was employed to describe and interpret the lived experience and essence of social isolation among shy and introverted learners in Norala District, providing in-depth, contextually grounded insights that can inform culturally responsive school practices, teacher strategies, and local mental health/learning supports.

The study revealed that shy and introverted learners in Norala District experience significant social isolation in school, characterized by limited participation in classroom discussions, avoidance of group activities, and preference for solitary tasks. This social withdrawal negatively affected their academic engagement and performance, as anxiety, self-doubt, and hesitation to interact with peers or teachers constrained their ability to demonstrate their capabilities.

Emotional and psychological challenges, including feelings of loneliness, stress, and low self-esteem, were common among these learners, often intensified by a lack of peer support or experiences of exclusion. However, supportive interventions such as gentle guidance from teachers, encouragement from classmates, structured classroom roles, and inclusive activities helped learners gradually build confidence, participate more actively, and feel a sense of belonging. The findings underscored that while social isolation presents substantial barriers, intentional scaffolding and a nurturing classroom environment can significantly mitigate these challenges and promote both social and academic development.

Further, it was shown that learners in socially isolated situations employ a combination of classroom-based, peer-related, teacher-guided, and self-directed strategies to cope and adjust. Inclusive teaching practices, such as cooperative

learning, small group activities, and differentiated instruction, helped students feel connected and safe in classroom settings. External factors, including cultural background, home environment, and peer behavior, influenced learners' engagement and sometimes contributed to feelings of isolation. Peer collaboration and structured low-pressure interactions fostered social engagement, trust, and confidence, while teacher guidance through encouragement, one-on-one support, and emotional scaffolding helped learners navigate challenges and build self-efficacy.

Additionally, learners utilized personal coping mechanisms, such as focusing on hobbies, reflective tasks, and individual achievements, to manage social discomfort independently.

Finally, the study revealed that learners in remote schools employ a combination of coping mechanisms to navigate social isolation, emphasizing both social and emotional strategies. Students actively sought guidance and reassurance from teachers, engaged in structured peer interactions, and participated in collaborative projects to foster inclusion and confidence. Independent and quiet activities, such as hobbies, reading, and art, allowed learners to regulate emotions and maintain engagement in safe, personal spaces. Gradual and reflective participation helped learners build confidence step by step, while emotional support from teachers and collaboration with parents enhanced trust, belonging, and social adjustment.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made in light of this study's findings: It is evident that social isolation among shy and introverted learners is not merely a personal struggle but a systemic issue that requires thoughtful support from educators, peers, and school structures. Creating safe,



inclusive, and responsive learning environments can empower these students to engage meaningfully, develop resilience, and build confidence over time.

Also, fostering social inclusion requires a holistic approach that combines structured classroom interventions, attentive teacher guidance, peer support, and opportunities for independent coping. Students' resilience and adaptive strategies demonstrate their capacity to overcome social barriers when provided with supportive and understanding environments.

This underscores the importance of designing learning spaces and activities that are not only academically engaging but also socially empowering, allowing learners to build confidence, interpersonal skills, and a sense of belonging even in the face of social isolation.

Finally, the study concluded that teachers, peers, and parents in scaffolding social and emotional development, emphasizing that meaningful engagement is possible when learners feel supported, valued, and included. Reflecting on these insights, it becomes evident that fostering inclusive environments, structured support, and personalized opportunities for interaction not only helps students navigate social challenges but also strengthens their confidence, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging within the school community.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the following were recommended:

1. **DepEd** may prioritize professional development programs that equip teachers in remote and resource-limited schools with strategies to support socially isolated learners. Provide accessible resources, such as inclusive teaching toolkits, low-cost collaborative materials, and guidance on emotional scaffolding, to ensure that shy

and introverted students can engage meaningfully.

2. **School Administrators** may foster a nurturing school climate by implementing structured peer-support programs, small group activities, and inclusive events that encourage participation for all learners. Encourage teacher-parent collaboration to identify students at risk of social isolation and create tailored support plans.

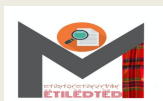
3. **Curriculum Planners** may integrate activities that balance group collaboration and independent tasks into the curriculum. This includes reflective exercises, arts, and hobby-based projects that allow introverted learners to contribute in ways that build confidence while maintaining comfort in socially sensitive settings.

4. **Teachers** may use gentle encouragement, one-on-one guidance, and low-pressure participation strategies to help learners gradually engage with peers. Assign roles in collaborative projects that allow shy students to contribute meaningfully without feeling overwhelmed. Continuously recognize efforts to build self-esteem and social confidence.

5. **Future Researchers** may explore innovative, low-cost interventions for socially isolated learners, including culturally responsive strategies, peer mentoring, and community-based engagement activities. Examine long-term effects of these interventions on academic performance, emotional well-being, and social integration to inform future inclusive education policies.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

This study ensured full compliance with ethical standards through approval from East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc. and adherence to established research protocols. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the investigation of learners' lived experiences of social isolation in Norala District.



Informed consent was obtained from all school heads, ensuring voluntary participation with a clear understanding of the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits, and allowing withdrawal at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage accessible only to the research team.

The study prioritized avoiding harm by minimizing emotional and psychological distress and providing support when needed. A respectful researcher-participant relationship was maintained to uphold dignity and prevent any form of exploitation. Data protection protocols were strictly implemented to ensure the secure handling and transmission of information.

Participation was voluntary and free from coercion, while the researcher maintained objectivity to reduce bias in data collection and analysis. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the study, and honesty and integrity were observed in reporting findings without manipulation.

The study also emphasized beneficence by ensuring its contribution to educational improvement. Cultural sensitivity was observed by respecting local beliefs and practices, while inclusion and diversity were prioritized to capture varied lived experiences of social isolation among learners, supporting culturally responsive teaching and school-based interventions.

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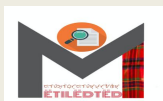
Above all, the researcher offers her utmost gratitude to **ALMIGHTY GOD** for his divine guidance, strength, wisdom, and abundant blessings throughout this academic endeavor.

Declaration AI Tools Utiization

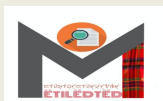
I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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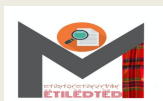
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