



## Research Article

# The Realities of Junior High School Teachers Teaching Outside Their Specialization

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of junior high school teachers teaching beyond their specialization in the Lopez Jaena District, Misamis Occidental, during the School Year 2025–2026. Sixteen purposively selected teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, and data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings revealed that teachers' lived experiences were characterized by Institutional and Contextual Realities, Emotional and Psychological Experiences, and Workload and Time Demands, which collectively shaped their adjustment to out-of-field teaching. In terms of challenges, teachers encountered Pedagogical Challenges, Instructional and Assessment Difficulties, and Systemic and Institutional Barriers, reflecting limitations in content mastery, instructional delivery, and resource availability. Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrated resilience through Adaptive Teaching Practices, including self-directed learning, collaboration, and utilization of digital resources. These practices contributed to Professional Growth and Development, Transformation of Teacher Identity, and Teacher Dedication and Resilience, enabling teachers to gradually build confidence and adaptability in unfamiliar subject areas. The study underscores that while teachers exhibit strong adaptability, persistent structural issues necessitate strengthened teacher deployment policies, targeted professional development, and improved institutional support systems to enhance teaching effectiveness, teacher well-being, and student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** *adaptive teaching practices, lived experiences, out-of-field teaching, pedagogical challenges, professional development, teacher identity, teacher resilience*

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## Introduction

Teaching at the junior high school level requires both strong subject mastery and confidence in instructional practice. Teachers should be able to explain difficult concepts in a way that is easy to understand and help students think more deeply and critically. Research supports this expectation, as Villocino et al. (2025) assert that teachers' content mastery directly influences instructional clarity, student engagement, and academic success. Likewise, teachers who work in their area of expertise also show better lesson planning, more accurate assessment methods, and more confident classroom management (Molise, 2021). When teachers are not well prepared in the subject they teach, their instruction can become less effective, and their confidence may decrease, especially in subjects that involve complex ideas (Mafa-Theledi, 2024). Because this factors, matching teachers' academic backgrounds with their teaching assignments plays an important role in improving student learning and educational quality (Mejia et al., 2025).

Even though specialization is important, many schools still assign teachers to subjects outside their field of specialization because of teacher shortages, schedule limitations, and administrative needs. This situation, known as out-of-field teaching or teaching beyond specialization, is becoming more common in developing countries and rural schools (Rodriguez, 2025). Research shows that teachers in this situation often struggle with preparing lessons, explaining difficult topics, and creating suitable assessments (Osman et al., 2024). These problems can make teachers' jobs harder and more stressful, especially for those who work in rural areas (Ming Huo, 2025). For this reason, many researchers now see out-of-field teaching as a wider system problem that needs policy solutions, not just a staffing issue (Hobs et al., 2021).

In the Philippines, this problem continues to affect many public secondary schools where there are limited subject specialists. Belmonte et al. (2024) reported that mismatches between teachers' specialization and their assigned subjects still occur in many schools. National education reports also indicate that there aren't enough specialists, especially in science and STEM subjects. This implies that teachers who lack the necessary training to teach the subject they are teaching are leading the classes (EDCOM 2, 2025; PIDS, 2025). Teachers assigned outside their field often have fewer chances to attend specialized training and must work with limited teaching materials (Tingzon et al., 2022). Rural districts face even more serious challenges due to limited access to mentoring, seminars, and professional support (Fabrigas et al., 2025). Because of this, concerns continue to grow about how such mismatches affect teaching quality and teacher well-being in the long term (Du Plessis et al., 2020).

Although many studies confirm that out of field teaching happens in many countries, fewer studies focus on how teachers personally experience this situation in their schools. UNESCO (2022) noted that most research discusses teacher shortages and policies but accords less attention to teachers' daily classroom realities. In the same way, Hobbs (2022) explained that there are still limited qualitative studies exploring teachers' coping strategies, emotions, and professional identity when they teach outside their specialization.

In the Philippines, rural schools encounter specific staffing and resource difficulties; however, the actual experiences of teachers in these regions are not extensively recorded (Rodriguez, 2025). The World Bank (2023) also emphasized that without local evidence, education leaders discover it difficult to design support programs that truly address teachers' needs.

Because of this gap, this study focuses on the experiences of junior high school teachers teaching beyond their specialization in the Lopez Jaena District, Division of Misamis Occidental. National policies such as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533) highlight the importance of teacher competence, standards-based instruction, and continuous professional development, yet mismatches between specialization and assignment still occur in schools (PhilippineGo, 2024). This study employs a qualitative methodology to elucidate teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms within their actual school environment.

The findings of this study are expected to provide evidence-based insights that may guide school leaders and education policymakers in improving teacher assignments and strengthening institutional support systems in rural junior high schools. For teachers, the results may help promote targeted professional development, mentoring opportunities, and capacity-building programs that address the realities of teaching beyond specialization. For students, improved teacher support and alignment of competencies may contribute to clearer instruction, stronger engagement, and better learning outcomes. For school heads, the study may inform more strategic workload

distribution, instructional supervision, and resource allocation. At the division and national levels, education authorities may utilize the findings to enhance teacher deployment policies and in-service training frameworks. Also, curriculum developers and program planners may use the results to design responsive interventions that address gap in content knowledge while safeguarding teacher well-being and instructional quality. Overall, the study seeks to contribute to more sustainable, context-sensitive solutions that uphold both teaching effectiveness and professional welfare in rural education settings.

## Methods

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of junior high school teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their academic specialization in selected integrated schools in the Lopez Jaena District, Division of Misamis Occidental. Sixteen (16) teachers from four integrated schools were purposively selected based on their direct experience in out-of-field teaching. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify patterns in teachers' experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. The study focuses on how teachers manage unfamiliar subject content, instructional demands, workload, professional confidence, and emotional pressures while adapting through preparation, self-learning, collaboration with colleagues, and other coping practices. The findings are intended to provide contextual insights that may guide school leaders and education officials in strengthening instructional support, professional development, and appropriate teaching assignments for teachers handling subjects beyond their specialization.

## Results and Discussions

### Theme 1: Instructional Challenges and Professional Strain in Out-of-Field Teaching

The first major theme reveals that teaching beyond one's specialization creates interconnected challenges involving content mastery, pedagogy, instructional planning, assessment, workload, and emotional well-being. Participants repeatedly described having to relearn unfamiliar concepts before they could confidently teach them, particularly in technical subjects such as Mathematics and Science. One participant explained, *"Honestly, it's quite difficult and requires extra effort... most of the topics and concepts are new to me... I have to study once again and make sure I am 5 chapters ahead than my students"* (P1). Other participants similarly reported exerting additional effort in studying and researching unfamiliar topics to prepare themselves for classroom discussion. These experiences show that out-of-field teaching places teachers in the unusual position of simultaneously being learners and instructors. Before they can simplify, contextualize, and explain a lesson to students, they must first develop sufficient understanding of the content themselves. Limited content mastery therefore affects not only teachers' confidence but also their ability to choose appropriate teaching strategies, respond to learners' questions, design meaningful activities, and construct assessments aligned with the intended learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with Du Plessis (2020) and Hobbs and Porsch (2021), who explain that teachers working outside their field commonly experience gaps in subject knowledge that may affect confidence and instructional effectiveness. The findings are also consistent with Pedagogical Content Knowledge, which emphasizes that effective instruction requires teachers not only to know the subject but also to understand how that knowledge can be represented, explained, and transformed into forms that learners can understand.

The instructional difficulty is further intensified by increased workload and time demands. Because participants cannot rely entirely on their previous preparation and specialized knowledge, they devote considerable time to reviewing lessons, researching unfamiliar concepts, preparing presentations, developing materials, and anticipating possible learner questions. One participant stated that teaching outside specialization required being "five chapters ahead" of the students, while another described spending one to two hours preparing a classroom presentation before going to bed. Participants also reported bringing school responsibilities home because lesson preparation had to be completed alongside grading, administrative requirements, and other school duties. As a result, the boundaries between professional responsibilities and personal life become increasingly unclear. Teachers sacrifice time that could otherwise be used for rest, family responsibilities, and personal activities in order to ensure that they are adequately prepared for the next day's lesson. The soft copy links these experiences to the Job Demands–Resources Theory, which explains that excessive job demands can contribute to strain and exhaustion when adequate resources and support are unavailable. The findings are supported by Du Plessis (2020) and Hobbs and Porsch (2021), who associate out-of-field teaching with

additional preparation requirements, while Mérida-López et al. (2022) connect excessive workload and time pressure with emotional exhaustion and difficulties in maintaining work–life balance. Thus, the challenge of out-of-field teaching is not confined to what happens during classroom instruction; it extends into teachers' personal time and affects the overall sustainability of their work.

The accumulated instructional and workload demands also produce important emotional and psychological consequences. Participants described nervousness, uncertainty, self-doubt, fear of providing inaccurate information, anxiety, frustration, fatigue, and feelings of being overwhelmed. These emotions appear to be closely connected to teachers' awareness that students depend on them for accurate and meaningful instruction even when the assigned subject is outside their formal preparation. One participant admitted struggling to explain lessons in detail, while another expressed worry about what could be provided to students because the subject was not the teacher's specialty. As the experience continued, repeated studying, extended preparation, and pressure to perform effectively intensified emotional strain. The findings indicate that these experiences may be understood through Teacher Self-Efficacy Theory because teachers' beliefs about their ability to perform unfamiliar instructional tasks influence their confidence, persistence, and emotional responses. They are likewise explained through the Job Demands–Resources framework because sustained demands without sufficient resources can contribute to stress and burnout. Collie (2021) and Kalinowski et al. (2024) support the finding that unfamiliar and demanding teaching conditions can be associated with reduced self-efficacy, emotional distress, and anxiety, while Mérida-López et al. (2022) link prolonged workload pressures with emotional exhaustion and burnout. Therefore, out-of-field teaching should not be viewed merely as a matter of assigning another subject to an available teacher; it represents a professional condition that can influence instructional performance, confidence, workload, and teacher well-being simultaneously.

## **Theme 2: Adaptive Practices, Resourcefulness, and Professional Support**

The second major theme demonstrates that teachers do not passively accept the difficulties associated with teaching beyond their specialization. Instead, they develop adaptive practices to compensate for gaps in content knowledge and pedagogical preparation. Self-directed learning emerged as one of the most important strategies. Participants reported studying curriculum guides, textbooks, academic references, online materials, and other available resources before conducting their lessons. They also watched instructional videos, reviewed unfamiliar concepts, prepared detailed lesson plans, anticipated possible questions from learners, and searched for examples that could make difficult concepts easier to understand. These behaviors indicate that teachers recognize their own limitations and deliberately attempt to address them through continuous preparation and independent learning. The process requires substantial personal initiative because the teacher must identify what needs to be learned, locate appropriate resources, evaluate information, and translate newly acquired knowledge into classroom instruction. The soft copy associates these adaptive practices with Experiential Learning Theory, which views professional learning as a continuous process of experience, reflection, application, and improvement. As teachers repeatedly encounter unfamiliar instructional situations, they experiment with different approaches, evaluate what works, and gradually develop the knowledge and skills necessary to teach the assigned subject. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Opfer and Pedder (2021) similarly emphasize the importance of continuous professional learning in strengthening teachers' flexibility and effectiveness. Thus, self-study becomes more than a temporary coping mechanism; it develops into an important form of professional learning through which teachers gradually reduce the gap between their formal specialization and their current teaching responsibilities.

Collaboration and the use of external resources also serve as essential adaptive mechanisms. Teachers recognize that they cannot always resolve unfamiliar content and instructional difficulties independently, leading them to seek assistance from colleagues, mentors, and subject specialists. Participants described consulting teachers who specialize in particular learning areas to clarify difficult concepts, validate assessment materials, obtain teaching strategies, and improve lesson delivery. At the same time, digital technology expands the range of support available to teachers. Online resources, videos, curriculum materials, exemplars, and other digital platforms are used to strengthen content understanding and generate ideas for classroom activities. This resourcefulness demonstrates teachers' willingness to maximize whatever forms of support are accessible in their immediate professional environment. However, the soft copy also reveals a significant concern: teachers sometimes depend heavily on external resources, including online exemplars and artificial intelligence, because of uncertainty in their own content knowledge and assessment practices. Such resources may provide valuable

immediate assistance, but their use should complement rather than replace professional judgment and subject mastery. The findings therefore emphasize the importance of structured collaboration and reliable instructional resources. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) and Vangrieken et al. (2020) support the role of professional collaboration in teacher development, while Trust et al. (2020) and OECD (2021) highlight the growing importance of digital resources in supporting instructional practices. These findings indicate that teachers' capacity to adapt becomes stronger when individual effort is reinforced by collegial expertise, accessible resources, and appropriate technology.

Although teachers demonstrate considerable initiative, the findings make clear that adaptation should not depend exclusively on individual resourcefulness. The soft copy identifies lack of subject-specific training, limited professional development opportunities, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient administrative and peer support as significant institutional concerns. This means that teachers may be highly motivated to improve but still face structural barriers that limit the effectiveness of their efforts. Teachers assigned beyond their specialization therefore require organized opportunities to strengthen both subject knowledge and pedagogical competence through relevant training, mentoring, Learning Action Cell activities, collaborative lesson planning, coaching from subject specialists, and access to quality instructional resources. Such support is particularly important because out-of-field teaching often results from institutional conditions such as teacher shortages and uneven distribution of specialized personnel rather than teachers' personal choice. The study consequently suggests a shared responsibility: teachers are expected to continuously learn and adapt, but schools and educational authorities must provide the resources and professional conditions that make successful adaptation possible. The soft copy emphasizes that proactive adaptive practices improve confidence and instructional effectiveness but still require sustained institutional support to ensure consistent and high-quality teaching. In this sense, adaptation becomes most sustainable when personal initiative, collegial collaboration, professional development, technology, and institutional support operate together rather than placing the entire burden of adjustment on individual teachers.

### **Theme 3: Professional Growth, Resilience, and Transformation of Teacher Identity**

The third major theme reveals an important transformation in teachers' experiences: although out-of-field teaching begins as a source of uncertainty and difficulty, continued exposure can contribute to professional growth. Participants described becoming more flexible, resourceful, creative, organized, and open to continuous learning as they adjusted to unfamiliar teaching assignments. One teacher shared, *"Though it is quite challenging, I have to admit it also honed and developed my flexibility as a teacher"* (P1), while another stated, *"I became more resourceful, flexible, and open to continuous learning"* (P2). These statements demonstrate that professional competence is not fixed solely by a teacher's original field of specialization. Teachers can develop additional capabilities through sustained engagement with unfamiliar tasks, particularly when they intentionally study, reflect on their practice, seek assistance, and experiment with alternative instructional approaches. Participants also reported becoming more creative in making lessons engaging and understandable and more capable of managing their time because of the additional preparation demanded by their assignments. Flores and Day (2021) and Caena and Redecker (2021) support the finding that exposure to diverse and unfamiliar teaching situations can strengthen adaptability and professional competence, while Schleicher (2020) and OECD (2020) emphasize creativity and problem-solving as important capabilities in changing educational environments. Therefore, while teaching beyond specialization creates substantial initial difficulty, the experience may also become a setting in which teachers develop competencies that extend beyond their original academic preparation.

Professional growth is also reflected in the gradual transformation of teachers' confidence and professional identity. Participants described moving from hesitation and uncertainty toward greater confidence as they became more familiar with their assigned subjects and experienced successful classroom interactions. One participant explained that the experience *"strengthened my confidence... transformed what started as uncertainty into professional growth"* (P2), while another stated that the experience made the teacher "more resilient, flexible, and self-assured" (P11). More significantly, participants began to reconsider what it means to be a teacher. Rather than viewing professional identity as limited to mastery of one specialized field, they increasingly described teaching as requiring adaptability, commitment, versatility, and willingness to continuously learn. One participant explained that being an educator is "not limited to mastering one field" but also involves being adaptable and committed to lifelong learning, while another simply emphasized that

“versatility is truly needed to be a teacher.” These experiences demonstrate that professional identity develops through engagement with actual teaching situations and the meanings teachers construct from those experiences. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) emphasize continuous learning and adaptation as important foundations of effective teaching, while König et al. (2020), Flores and Day (2021), and OECD (2021) connect challenging professional experiences with the development of competence, confidence, and lifelong learning. The findings therefore suggest that teachers’ initial feelings of inadequacy do not necessarily remain permanent; through repeated mastery experiences, reflection, and learning, uncertainty can gradually develop into professional confidence and a broader understanding of the teaching role.

Finally, the transformation observed among participants is sustained by dedication, resilience, and a strong sense of purpose toward learners. Teachers continue studying, preparing, and improving not merely because these tasks are required but because they feel responsible for ensuring that students receive meaningful instruction. The participants’ accounts reveal that passion for teaching, commitment to learners, personal values, and professional responsibility serve as important internal resources that help them persist despite pressure and unfamiliarity. Some teachers describe their work as a mission and emphasize the importance of leaving their comfort zones for the sake of learners. These values help explain why teachers continue exerting effort even when out-of-field teaching demands substantial personal time and emotional energy. The soft copy notes that Kalinowski et al. (2024) associates intrinsic motivation and professional commitment with persistence and adaptability, while Salas-Rodríguez et al. (2025) emphasizes the role of teachers’ beliefs, values, and sense of purpose in engagement and resilience. Baka et al. (2023) likewise identifies motivation, commitment, and emotional investment as personal resources that can help educators manage demanding working conditions. Viewed through Teacher Self-Efficacy Theory, Job Demands–Resources Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory, these findings show that teachers’ resilience develops through the interaction of confidence, personal motivation, experience, reflection, and available professional resources. However, resilience should not be interpreted as justification for continuously assigning teachers outside their specialization without adequate assistance. Rather, the teachers’ dedication should be matched by appropriate staffing, training, instructional resources, and institutional support. Their resilience demonstrates professional commitment, but sustainable quality education requires a system that enables teachers not merely to survive challenging assignments but to teach effectively, confidently, and with adequate support.

## **Conclusions**

This study concludes that out-of-field teaching among junior high school teachers in the Lopez Jaena District is largely driven by systematic factors such as teacher shortages, limited subject specialization, and administrative demands, making it a common reality in rural schools. While teachers experience significant emotional, pedagogical, and workload related challenges including self-doubt, content limitations, and increased preparation time—they demonstrate strong resilience and adaptability through self-directed learning, collaboration, and continuous professional development. These experiences not only highlight their dedication and commitment to student learning but also contribute to their professional growth and transformation as more flexible educators. However, the persistence of structural barriers such as inadequate training, limited resources, and a lack of institutional support underscores the urgent need for improved teacher deployment policies, strengthened support systems, and sustained professional development to enhance both teacher well-being and the overall quality of education.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that teachers assigned to subjects beyond their specialization continuously strengthen their content knowledge and instructional competence through structured self-directed learning, regular lesson preparation, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, peer mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, and the responsible use of digital tools and artificial intelligence aligned with curriculum standards and learning competencies. Students may be provided with differentiated and scaffolded instruction, simplified and contextualized explanations, interactive learning activities, guided practice, remediation, and enrichment activities to address learning difficulties and ensure meaningful understanding of complex concepts. School heads and administrators are encouraged to establish structured support systems through subject mentoring, regular LAC sessions, collaborative planning, constructive instructional supervision, appropriate workload distribution, and the reduction of excessive non-teaching responsibilities among teachers handling subjects outside their specialization. Department of Education officials

may further strengthen teacher deployment by ensuring better alignment between teachers' areas of specialization and their teaching assignments and by providing accessible subject-specific training on content, pedagogy, and assessment, particularly for schools with limited specialist teachers. Curriculum planners and program designers may develop simplified teaching guides, contextualized instructional materials, ready-to-use lesson exemplars, and professional development modules focusing on pedagogical content knowledge and assessment literacy. Parents, local government units, and other stakeholders are likewise encouraged to support schools through the provision of appropriate resources and active participation in educational programs and community-based learning initiatives. Policy makers may strengthen the implementation and monitoring of teacher deployment policies and provide appropriate incentives, professional development opportunities, and resources to address the systemic challenges associated with out-of-field teaching. Finally, future researchers may examine the effects of out-of-field teaching on student academic performance, teacher well-being, professional competence, and retention using mixed-method approaches, larger samples, and participants from diverse educational contexts to provide broader evidence and deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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