

THE MISMATCH: EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF NON-SPECIALIST TEACHING

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Abstract

Teacher specialization remains a critical foundation of effective instruction. However, many schools continue to assign educators to subjects outside their formal preparation, creating challenges that affect teaching quality, teacher confidence, and institutional responsiveness. This study explored the lived experiences of non-specialist teachers in Lingayen, Pangasinan, with emphasis on the challenges they encountered, the effects of specialization mismatch on their pedagogical approaches, the institutional support available to them, and the intervention measures that may address their needs. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, the study gathered data from ten purposively selected non-specialist teachers through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings embedded in the participants' narratives. Findings revealed that non-specialist teachers experienced substantial difficulties rooted in limited content mastery, increased preparation time, instructional insecurity, and emotional strain. These challenges influenced their classroom practices, leading to survival-based pedagogical strategies such as heavy reliance on textbooks, simplification of lessons, avoidance of complex concepts, and improvised instructional methods. The study further found that institutional support was often inconsistent, generic, and insufficient, while collegial assistance from subject-specialist peers emerged as the most practical form of support. Participants emphasized the need for subject-specific professional development, structured mentoring, co-teaching arrangements, and stricter specialization-based deployment policies. The study concluded that non-specialist teaching is not merely a staffing concern but a systemic instructional issue requiring coordinated interventions at the school, policy, and professional development levels to enhance teacher competence, well-being, and instructional effectiveness.

Keywords: Non-Specialist Teaching, Teacher Specialization Mismatch, Pedagogical Challenges, Institutional Support, Qualitative Phenomenology, Professional Development

1. Introduction

Teacher shortages, uneven deployment, and curriculum pressures have made out-of-field or non-specialist teaching a persistent feature of school systems across countries. UNESCO reported that the world will need 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers by 2030, a shortage that often compels schools to assign available teachers to vacancies rather than to where their specialization best aligns. In the literature, teaching out of field refers to situations in which teachers are assigned subjects for which they have inadequate preparation, qualifications, or specialization. Ingersoll's work remains foundational in showing that this practice is not merely a staffing inconvenience but a form of underqualification because a licensed teacher may still be insufficiently prepared for the specific disciplinary and pedagogical demands of a subject outside his or her training. For this reason, the issue should be understood not only as a workforce problem but also as a challenge to instructional quality, teacher effectiveness, and educational equity (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; Ingersoll, 2002; UNESCO, 2024).

The instructional significance of non-specialist teaching is best understood through the lens of teacher knowledge. Shulman (1986, 1987) argued that effective teaching depends not simply on generic pedagogical skill but on the integration of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, or the teacher's capacity to transform disciplinary knowledge into forms that learners can meaningfully understand. When teachers are deployed outside their specialization, this integration becomes fragile. They may know how to manage a class, sequence activities, or assess learning in general terms, yet still struggle to explain concepts with precision, anticipate misconceptions, or design tasks that preserve conceptual rigor. Hobbs and Porsch (2021) likewise noted that out-of-field teaching often places teachers in professional situations for which they are inadequately prepared, especially during early career stages, when identity formation and competence-building are still underway. Thus, specialization mismatch does not merely reduce teacher comfort; it can weaken the intellectual coherence of instruction itself (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; Shulman, 1986, 1987).

Empirical research further shows that the consequences of teaching outside one's field extend beyond content coverage to teacher confidence, identity, and professional growth. Du Plessis, Gillies, and Carroll (2014) described out-of-field teaching as an international concern with major implications for professional development because teachers assigned to unfamiliar subjects develop needs that generic, one-size-fits-all programs cannot address. Their analysis emphasized issues of confidence, self-esteem, belongingness, and access to relevant support. More recent work has echoed these concerns. Biebricher (2023), for example, found that out-of-field assignments can shape teacher identity over time, while a Philippine study by Recede et al. (2023) showed that teachers assigned beyond their preservice preparation often reported only moderate confidence in helping struggling learners and promoting higher-order thinking. Together, these studies suggest that non-specialist teaching influences not only what teachers know, but also how they see themselves, how cautiously they teach, and how effectively they respond to learner needs (Biebricher, 2023; du Plessis et al., 2014; Recede et al., 2023).

The Philippine context makes the issue especially urgent. EDCOM 2 reported in 2024 that 62% of high school teachers in the Philippines were teaching subjects they did not major in during college, indicating a large-scale misalignment between preservice preparation and actual teaching assignments. A PIDS policy note published in 2025 similarly characterized teacher-subject mismatch as widespread, while another PIDS publication emphasized that such mismatch affects pedagogical effectiveness and student learning outcomes. At the same time, Philippine evidence also points to weaknesses in teacher content mastery and the uneven accessibility of in-service support. World Bank analyses cited in Philippine policy discussions have noted that many teachers lack mastery of the content. At the same time, recent PIDS work has examined whether teachers assigned outside their specialization had attended the appropriate training programs, suggesting that workforce mismatch and professional development gaps are closely linked. This convergence of staffing, knowledge, and training concerns makes non-specialist teaching a systemic issue rather than an isolated school-level anomaly (EDCOM 2, 2024; Mejia et al., 2025; Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2025; World Bank, 2020).

Philippine policy and legal frameworks also underscore the expectation that teaching quality must rest on professional competence and adequate support. Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, affirms a complete and quality basic education system and explicitly includes teacher education and training within reform implementation. Republic Act No. 7836, the Philippine Teachers Professionalization Act of 1994, frames teaching as a regulated profession and anchors quality education in licensure and professional standards. Republic Act No. 4670, the Magna Carta for Public School Teachers, was enacted to promote and improve the status, conditions, and career opportunities of public school teachers. In parallel, DepEd Order No. 7, s. 2015 stresses the need for highly competent teachers and links hiring policy to the broader goal of improving the quality of basic education. Taken together, these policies imply that

teacher assignment should not be indifferent to specialization, because instructional quality depends on both qualification and institutional support (Department of Education, 2015; Republic of the Philippines, 1966, 1994, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the present study, “The Mismatch: Exploring the Challenges of Non-Specialist Teaching,” is timely and necessary because it moves the discussion from broad policy concern to lived instructional reality in Lingayen, Pangasinan. The uploaded thesis shows that the study is specifically concerned with the challenges faced by non-specialist teachers, the effects of specialization mismatch on pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies, the institutional support and professional development available to them, and the intervention measures that may be proposed from their experiences. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study is positioned to capture nuances that large-scale policy discussions often miss: how teachers make sense of unfamiliar content, how they adapt classroom practice under pressure, how support is actually experienced, and what forms of intervention are most meaningful within a local school context. In doing so, the study contributes not only to the literature on teacher specialization mismatch but also to ongoing efforts to strengthen instructional quality, teacher well-being, and institutional responsiveness in Philippine basic education.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to examine the lived experiences of non-specialist teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their area of specialization. This design was appropriate because the inquiry sought to capture the depth, complexity, and subjective meanings embedded in teachers’ instructional struggles, professional adjustments, and personal reflections within authentic school contexts. Rather than measuring variables quantitatively, the study pursued a naturalistic and interpretive understanding of how participants experienced specialization mismatch, how such mismatch shaped their pedagogical identity and instructional decision-making, and how they navigated the institutional conditions surrounding their assignments. Data were generated primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to probe for nuance, clarification, and reflective detail. Interview data were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and examined through an inductive thematic analysis to identify significant statements, recurring meanings, emergent themes, and subthemes grounded in the participants’ narratives. The design likewise incorporated reflexivity and trustworthiness measures—credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability—to ensure methodological rigor and interpretive integrity. Overall, the chosen research design provided a rich and systematic framework for uncovering the instructional, emotional, and institutional realities of non-specialist teaching and for generating findings that can inform educational policy, school support systems, and teacher development initiatives.

2.2 Participants

The study consisted of ten purposively selected non-specialist teachers from various schools in Lingayen, Pangasinan, who had direct experience teaching subjects outside their academic preparation, field of specialization, or professional training. Their inclusion was deliberate and criterion-based, as the study sought information-rich cases that could illuminate the lived realities of specialization mismatch in actual school settings. As central informants, these teachers were considered most qualified to articulate the instructional, emotional, and institutional dimensions of non-specialist teaching because they had personally navigated unfamiliar subject

content, adapted their pedagogical practices, and interacted with school support systems while carrying mismatched teaching assignments. The study emphasized depth rather than numerical breadth; hence, the relatively small participant group was methodologically appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, which aims to generate nuanced, context-sensitive, and experientially grounded insights rather than statistical generalizations. Their narratives provided rich, descriptive accounts of how they understood their roles and how they coped with instructional demands. They interpreted the effects of teaching outside their specialization, thereby supplying the empirical foundation for the study's thematic analysis and subsequent intervention proposals.

2.3 Instrumentation

The study employed a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide as its primary research instrument, a choice well aligned with the phenomenological orientation of the inquiry because it enabled the systematic elicitation of rich, experience-based narratives from non-specialist teachers while preserving the flexibility needed to probe unexpected yet analytically relevant insights. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions anchored in the study's problem statement. It was designed to elicit in-depth accounts of teachers' instructional challenges, pedagogical adjustments, experiences with institutional support, and recommended intervention measures. Its semi-structured format ensured both consistency across participants and responsiveness to each participant's unique lived experience, thereby enhancing the depth and authenticity of the data. To strengthen content validity, the interview guide underwent expert validation, after which revisions were made to improve clarity, relevance, sequencing, and scope. In addition to the interview guide, the researcher used audio recordings to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses, field notes to capture contextual cues and nonverbal expressions, and supplementary observations and informal conversations to enrich interpretation. Collectively, these instruments supported the generation of comprehensive, credible, and contextually grounded qualitative data necessary for examining the multifaceted realities of non-specialist teaching.

2.4 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis as its principal method of qualitative data analysis, following the systematic framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure an orderly, rigorous, and interpretive examination of the narratives generated from the semi-structured interviews. After each interview, the audio-recorded responses were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity, nuance, and semantic depth of the participants' accounts. The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve data familiarization, after which the researcher identified significant statements, recurrent expressions, and meaningful segments relevant to the study's objectives. These data units were then inductively coded and clustered into broader categories, allowing preliminary patterns to emerge from participants' lived experiences rather than preconceived assumptions. Through iterative review and refinement, these categories evolved into coherent themes and subthemes that captured the instructional, emotional, pedagogical, and institutional dimensions of non-specialist teaching. The finalized themes were subsequently synthesized into an analytically integrated narrative that directly addressed the problem statement. To strengthen interpretive credibility, the researcher also practiced reflexivity throughout the analytic process and employed member checking by allowing participants to review their transcribed responses for accuracy and clarification. Overall, the adopted data analysis procedure enabled the study to derive rich, trustworthy, and contextually grounded thematic insights into the complexities of teaching outside one's specialization.

3 Results

The study found that the experiences of non-specialist teachers in Lingayen, Pangasinan were shaped primarily by limited content expertise, which emerged as the most pervasive source of instructional difficulty. Participants described struggling with inadequate mastery of the subject matter they were assigned to teach, making lesson delivery more demanding and emotionally taxing. This lack of specialization translated into hesitation when explaining concepts, uncertainty in answering learners' questions, and difficulty in constructing assessments that accurately reflected curricular expectations. More importantly, the mismatch generated an intensified workload, as teachers had to devote substantial time to self-study, repeated textbook review, and independent preparation to meet the minimum requirements of classroom instruction. As a result, the findings established that non-specialist teaching was not an occasional inconvenience but a continuing professional burden that shaped teachers' daily practice and sense of competence.

A second major result showed that specialization mismatch significantly affected teachers' pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies. Rather than exercising fully developed subject-specific pedagogy, the participants tended to adopt what the study identified as survival-based teaching strategies. These included heavy reliance on textbooks, modules, and teacher's guides; simplification of lessons; avoidance of cognitively demanding tasks; and reduced use of inquiry-based activities or higher-order questioning. Such strategies were not merely matters of personal preference but practical responses to insecurity about content knowledge. At the same time, the findings also demonstrated teacher resilience, as participants attempted to compensate through improvised instructional materials, multimedia integration, contextual examples, and other adaptive classroom techniques. Nevertheless, the study found that these coping strategies, while helpful in sustaining classroom instruction, did not fully compensate for the absence of strong pedagogical content knowledge associated with formal specialization.

The third area of results focused on institutional support and professional development, where the findings indicated inconsistencies, insufficiencies, and weak alignment with teachers' actual needs. Although some forms of assistance were available, they were often generic and failed to address the specific subject-content gaps faced by non-specialist teachers. Training opportunities were often broad and procedural rather than discipline-specific, limiting their usefulness for teachers assigned outside their areas of expertise. Administrators were generally aware of the mismatch problem. However, their responses were often constrained by staffing shortages, budget limitations, and structural hiring issues, leading to short-term accommodations rather than long-term solutions. In practice, the most meaningful support came from informal collegial networks, particularly from subject-specialist peers who shared lesson plans, explained difficult content, and provided emotional encouragement. This result underscored that peer mentoring had become the *de facto* support system, even though it lacked formal institutional structure and sustainability.

Finally, the study generated a set of proposed intervention measures grounded in the participants' lived experiences. Teachers consistently recommended subject-specific professional development, more deliberate and specialization-based deployment policies, and the institutionalization of mentoring and co-teaching arrangements. These recommendations reflected a practical understanding that the issue of non-specialist teaching required both immediate support and systemic reform. At the school level, the results pointed to the need for structured coaching, accessible specialist guidance, and targeted capacity-building. At the policy level, the findings emphasized the importance of improving teacher assignment practices to align specialization and instructional responsibility better. Taken together, the study's results portrayed non-specialist teaching as both an instructional and an organizational issue—one that affects teacher confidence, pedagogical quality, and the broader effectiveness of the educational system.

4. Discussion

The present study found that the most persistent burden of non-specialist teaching was limited content mastery, which in turn led to instructional insecurity, excessive preparation demands, and emotional strain among participants. This finding is strongly corroborated by Shulman's (1986) argument that effective teaching depends not only on general classroom technique but also on teachers' grasp of subject matter and their ability to transform it into teachable representations. In the same vein, Hobbs and Porsch (2021) characterize teaching out-of-field as a condition in which teachers are assigned to subjects for which they lack adequate preparation. This mismatch places pressure on both competence and identity. du Plessis et al. (2014) likewise show that out-of-field teaching is associated with confidence problems, fragile professional belonging, and highly specific developmental needs. Taken together, these sources support the present study's conclusion that specialization mismatch is not merely an assignment issue; it is a layered instructional and psychosocial condition that reshapes how teachers prepare, perform, and perceive themselves in the classroom.

The study also revealed that non-specialist teachers frequently adopted survival-based pedagogy, including heavy reliance on textbooks and modules, simplification of lessons, avoidance of complex content, and cautious restriction of higher-order questioning. This pattern is consistent with Shulman's (1986) "missing paradigm" critique, which explains that when content knowledge is weak, instruction risks becoming generic, procedural, and disconnected from deep conceptual understanding. The present findings are further supported by recent Philippine evidence from Mejia et al. (2025), who reported that subject-teaching alignment is positively associated with students' examination scores and that out-of-field teachers commonly experience lower confidence, increased preparation time, and greater difficulty addressing student misconceptions. These convergences suggest that the participants' conservative instructional choices were less a failure of commitment than a rational adaptation to inadequate subject-specific preparation. At the same time, the present study's account of improvised multimedia use and contextualized examples underscores teacher resilience; however, the evidence indicates that such compensatory practices cannot fully replace strong pedagogical content knowledge when curricular rigor is required.

A third point of corroboration concerns institutional support and professional development. Participants in the present study described support as inconsistent, generic, and often dependent on informal collegial help rather than formal systems. This closely mirrors du Plessis et al. (2014), who argue that one-size-fits-all professional development is poorly suited to the needs of out-of-field teachers, as their learning needs are content- and context-specific. The OECD similarly warns that one-off seminars have generally failed to produce meaningful professional growth and emphasizes that sustained collaboration and school-based professional learning are more effective for improving teaching quality. In the Philippine setting, this discussion is especially relevant because DepEd's NEAP Professional Development Framework explicitly distinguishes regular programs, which are non-subject-specific, from subject content programs, which are intended to improve teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in relevant learning areas. Read against that framework, the present study suggests that the issue is not the absence of policy language on targeted support, but the insufficient translation of that intent into accessible, sustained, and subject-specific assistance for non-specialist teachers at the school level.

Finally, the intervention measures proposed by participants—subject-specific professional development, stricter specialization-based deployment, and formal mentoring or co-teaching arrangements—are strongly reinforced by current Philippine policy discourse and research. Mejia et al. (2025) recommend recruitment and assignment procedures that prioritize teacher-subject matching, alongside targeted professional development and strategic workforce planning. EDCOM 2 has also reported that 62% of high school teachers are teaching subjects they did not

major in during college, underscoring that the mismatch identified in the present study reflects a broader structural problem rather than an isolated local anomaly. In addition, DepEd has publicly committed to professional development focused on learning area specialization and to graduate certificate programs for nonmajors. These converging lines of evidence strengthen the study's practical significance: its recommendations are grounded in participant experience and aligned with national reform directions.

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