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NAVIGATING INSTRUCTIONAL GAPS: A CLASSIC GROUNDED THEORY OF NON-SPECIALIZED PUBLIC SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Teachers teaching subjects outside their field of specialization remains a structural reality in Philippine public senior high schools, yet few studies explain the social processes through which affected teachers address the resulting instructional gaps. This study generated a substantive theory of how public senior high school teachers navigate and resolve instructional gaps when assigned to subjects outside their specialization conducted during October 2026, using Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 public senior high school teachers in the province of Bataan, Philippines, each of whom had handled a non-specialized assignment for at least one academic year. Initial purposive sampling was followed by theoretical sampling, and data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously through constant comparison, memoing, open and selective coding, and theoretical coding until theoretical saturation was reached. The participants' main concern was Pedagogical Vulnerability: persistent anxiety over content inaccuracy and learner misinformation, together with apprehension about unanswerable student questions. Teachers resolved this concern through a core process, Pedagogical Bridging, which unfolded in four interrelated stages: Rapid Content Acquisition, Peer-Driven Synergizing, Contextualized and Transparent Delivery, and Professional Identity Re-anchoring. Over repeated cycles, teachers tended to move from scripted survival toward adaptive practice; this movement was conditional, nonlinear, and shaped by disciplinary proximity, workload, access to subject specialists, and administrative support. Adaptive practice represented a workable instructional capability rather than disciplinary equivalence. The theory implies that school-based peer networks, protected preparation time, closer alignment between specialization and assignment, and structured onboarding are needed so that instructional quality does not depend on uncompensated teacher effort.

Keywords: *Non-specialized Teaching, Classic grounded theory, Pedagogical vulnerability, Pedagogical bridging, Philippine basic education.*

INTRODUCTION

Quality education depends fundamentally on the quality and preparation of the teachers who deliver it (Sunthonkanokpong & Murphy, 2019). This premise is anchored in United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), whose Target 4.c calls on states to substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers by 2030 (Albert et al., 2023), and increasing that supply has become a global policy priority in its own right (Tatto, 2021). The placement of teachers in subjects outside their areas of expertise, commonly referred to as non-specialized or out-of-field teaching, therefore poses a direct challenge to this goal. Hobbs and Porsch (2021) define the phenomenon through the mismatch among a teacher's assignment, preparation, certification, and specialization.

Non-specialized teaching has been documented across diverse educational systems (Badaru & Ndlovu, 2025). In a rural Philippine school district, 33.9% of teachers were assigned subjects outside their expertise, and these teachers reported lower job satisfaction than their in-field counterparts (Rodriguez, 2025). Preparation gaps weaken content knowledge and intensify teaching anxiety (Anselmo & Anselmo, 2024; Bugwak, 2021). Most inquiries, however, have adopted quantitative, descriptive, or phenomenological designs (Candelario & Abo, 2025; Rodriguez, 2025). Although such studies document the extent and consequences of the practice and illuminate teachers' subjective perceptions, they offer limited explanation of the recurring patterns of action and social processes through which teachers continually address instructional gaps over time. Few studies have used Classic Grounded Theory to explain these processes (Saldivar, 2024), and this scarcity is especially pronounced in the Philippine senior high school setting.

The Philippine context heightens the problem. Local studies describe non-specialized teaching as a defining reality of senior high school classrooms, with teachers reporting diminished professional confidence and instructional effectiveness (Calaguas & Dungca, 2025; Mercado & Morante, 2024). Republic Act No. 10533 (2013) institutionalized senior high school and established the Academic, Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL), Sports, and Arts and Design strands, which require subject-matter expertise beyond what general teacher preparation typically provides. The Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers, adopted through DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017, in turn expect teachers to demonstrate command of content knowledge and pedagogy (Department of Education, 2017). Teachers assigned outside their specialization must meet these expectations without the corresponding formal preparation.

Classic Grounded Theory is suited to this problem because it generates theory from data by identifying participants' main concern and the process through which they continually resolve it, rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023). Consistent with this tradition,

stress-and-coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) were treated only as sensitizing background and were not used to pre-set categories. Existing literature was compared with the emerging categories only after they had emerged, as guidance on the use of extant literature in Classic Grounded Theory advises (Nathaniel, 2022). The resulting substantive theory is expected to inform school heads, the Department of Education, and teacher education institutions in designing mentorship, deployment, and professional development responses for teachers assigned outside their fields.

Research Questions

The general objective of this study was to generate a substantive Classic Grounded Theory that explains how public senior high school teachers navigate and resolve instructional gaps when assigned to teach subjects outside their field of specialization. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the main concern encountered by public senior high school teachers when assigned to non-specialized teaching assignments?
2. What properties and contextual factors characterize this main concern across different disciplinary assignments?
3. What core strategies and processes do teachers employ to resolve their main instructional challenges in non-specialized subjects?
4. How does the generated substantive theory, anchored in its emergent core category, explain how public senior high school teachers continually address instructional challenges associated with non-specialized teaching assignments?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design using Classic Grounded Theory in the Glaserian tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kenny & Fourie, 2015; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2023). The design was selected because the purpose was not to test hypotheses, verify a priori frameworks, or measure predetermined variables, but to generate a substantive theory grounded in participants' accounts. The Glaserian approach emphasizes emergence, theoretical sensitivity, constant comparison, memoing, theoretical sampling, substantive and theoretical coding, and theoretical saturation. Concepts such as stress, coping, resilience, self-efficacy, survival, adaptation, and mastery were not imposed as categories; they served only as sensitizing ideas and did not control coding or theory generation.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected public senior high schools in the province of Bataan, Philippines, where teachers handled subjects outside their formal specialization.

The locale was chosen for its accessibility, its relevance to the phenomenon, and the presence of teachers with non-specialized assignments. These schools operate within the implementation context of senior high school specialization, curricular alignment, and teacher deployment policies, which makes them appropriate for examining how teachers address instructional gaps.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The data sources were public senior high school teachers who had handled at least one subject outside their field of specialization for at least one full academic year and who volunteered to take part in an in-depth interview. Teachers who handled only in-field subjects, teachers in purely administrative positions, pre-service teachers, and teachers outside the senior high school level were excluded from the initial data collection. In Classic Grounded Theory, participants are not treated as a fixed sample but as initial and subsequent sources of data that support the emergence and refinement of concepts. A total of 15 teachers participated; their profile is presented in Table 1.

Data collection began with open purposive sampling to establish a baseline of rich data from which the participants' main concern could be discovered. Initial data collection involved three secondary teachers with non-specialized assignments, and open coding of their incidents yielded the early concept of Information Deconstruction. As open coding produced conceptual categories, open sampling was replaced by theoretical sampling. To saturate the properties and boundary conditions of the emerging concept, data collection was directed toward teachers handling high-abstraction subjects (for example, General Mathematics assigned to Humanities majors) and low-abstraction skill subjects (for example, Physical Education). Sampling ceased when constant comparative analysis yielded no new conceptual properties, which confirmed theoretical saturation of the core category, Pedagogical Bridging.

Research Instrument and Data Gathering

In Classic Grounded Theory, the researchers themselves are the primary research instrument: they conduct the interviews, listen analytically, write memos, compare incidents, and make theoretical decisions as categories emerge. To support data gathering, an initial semi-structured interview guide was used. It contained 14 broad, open-ended, non-directive questions on participants' assignments, challenges, actions, decisions, support systems, and ongoing ways of addressing instructional gaps (for example, "Please tell me about your experience of being assigned to teach a subject outside your field of specialization" and "When you first learned about the non-specialized assignment, what was your main concern?"), with flexible probing questions. The guide was designed not to force responses into stress-coping, self-efficacy, or survival-to-mastery frameworks. As substantive coding progressed, prompts were adapted through theoretical sampling to explore the emerging properties of Pedagogical Bridging.

Before data collection, ethics clearance and official permissions were secured from the appropriate institutional and educational authorities. Eligible teachers were invited

through proper channels and gave written informed consent. Individual interviews were held at a safe, convenient physical location or on an online platform and, with permission, were audio-recorded; where a participant declined recording, detailed field notes were taken. After each session, the researchers wrote field notes and analytic memos. Recordings were transcribed, verified for accuracy, and anonymized. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, so that emerging concepts from early interviews guided theoretical sampling and later interview questions until saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

Analysis began as soon as the first interview was completed and followed the Glaserian procedure. Through constant comparison (Kolb, 2012), the researchers compared incident with incident, incident with code, code with code, code with category, and category with category. Open coding was conducted line by line and incident by incident, keeping initial codes close to the data. Memos documented analytic ideas, comparisons, emerging patterns, and theoretical hunches, and served as the bridge between coding and theory generation. Once a potential core category emerged, selective coding focused on data related to it and its related categories. Theoretical coding conceptualized the relationships among categories; axial coding was not used because it belongs to the Straussian tradition and is not aligned with Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory. Saturation was judged conceptually rather than numerically, as the point at which additional data no longer generated new properties, dimensions, or relationships. The resulting theory was evaluated on fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Rigor was established through general qualitative criteria alongside the evaluation criteria of Classic Grounded Theory. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, careful interviewing, constant comparison, memo writing, and participant clarification when necessary. Dependability was supported by an audit trail of interview schedules, transcripts, coding records, memos, sampling decisions, and analytic notes. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memoing and documentation of analytic decisions. Transferability was supported by sufficient contextual description of the participants, setting, and conditions for readers to judge applicability to similar contexts. The researchers' professional familiarity with senior high school teaching, including experience with unfamiliar assignments, may influence how they listen and interpret; reflexive memoing was therefore used to identify assumptions, monitor theoretical forcing, and remain attentive to participants' actual words and actions.

RESULTS

The results are presented in four parts: the profile of the participants, the main concern and its properties, the core process of Pedagogical Bridging, and the emergent

substantive theory. Participants are identified by codes (P1 to P15). Quotations originally given in Filipino are followed by English translations in parentheses.

Part 1. Profile of the Participants

Table 1 presents the profile of the 15 teacher-participants, including teaching experience, specialization, the subject taught outside specialization, and the length of the non-specialized assignment.

Table 1 shows that non-specialized assignment cuts across career stages. Teaching experience ranged from three years (P5) to 20 years (P2), while the duration of the non-specialized assignment ranged from one year (P5 and P6) to eight years (P14 and P15). The mismatch also crossed sharply different disciplinary domains: English majors handled General Mathematics (P6 and P11), a Filipino major handled ICT/Empowerment Technologies (P12), a Social Studies major handled Physical Science (P13), and a teacher without matching science preparation handled Science and Practical Research (P15). General classroom experience therefore did not automatically remove the content and pedagogical demands created by subject misalignment. The consequences of mismatch also varied by subject: content-dense disciplines created fear of factual or conceptual error; performance-based subjects raised concerns about demonstration and safety; technology-based subjects added equipment, connectivity, and rapidly changing applications; and values-oriented teaching required careful facilitation of sensitive and divergent learner responses.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

Participant	Teaching Experience	Specialization / Degree	Non-Specialized Subject(s) Assigned	Years Handling the Assignment
P1	12 years	TLE	TVL - Home Economics (FBS / Cookery)	7 years
P2	20 years	Social Sciences	Filipino	4 years
P3	15 years	General Math	Oral Communication in Context / DRRR	5 years
P4	6 years	General Science	Filipino	4 years
P5	3 years	General Math	Filipino	1 year
P6	9 years	English	General Mathematics	1 year
P7	12 years	Mathematics	Earth & Life Science	3 years
P8	8 years	Filipino	Values Education	3 years
P9	14 years	MAPEH	Araling Panlipunan	2 years
P10	10 years	Science	Physical Education & Health	2 years

Participant	Teaching Experience	Specialization / Degree	Non-Specialized Subject(s) Assigned	Years Handling the Assignment
P11	5 years	English	General Mathematics	3 years
P12	8 years	Filipino	ICT / Empowerment Technologies	2 years
P13	10 years	Social Studies	Physical Science	4 years
P14	9 years	Science	Filipino	8 years
P15	9 years	Non-Science Major	Science / Practical Research	8 years

Part 2. Main Concern: Pedagogical Vulnerability

Through constant comparative analysis, the participants' recurring main concern was conceptualized as Pedagogical Vulnerability: the persistent anxiety, content mastery deficit, and fear of instructional compromise experienced when teaching outside one's specialization. It comprised two themes.

Theme A: Anxiety Over Content Inaccuracy and Learner Misinformation

Epistemic Vulnerability emerged as a primary property of the main concern. It was not merely personal anxiety but an operational fear of transmitting misinformation. As disciplinary distance increased, teachers described a collapse of instructional authority. This vulnerability was moderated by two sub-properties: Fact-checking Lag, the delay between lesson preparation and content verification, and Spontaneous Query Exposure, the perceived risk of unscripted student inquiry during delivery. P5, a General Mathematics major assigned to Filipino, described her first-year anxiety:

"My biggest concern was ensuring content accuracy and effectively explaining complex concepts without misleading students. Hirap na hirap ako sa simula kasi ayaw kong magbigay ng maling impormasyon (I struggled terribly at the beginning because I did not want to give incorrect information)." (P5, General Mathematics major)

P2, a Social Sciences major who had taught Filipino for four years, likewise described losing confidence in unfamiliar curricular terrain:

"I was used to teaching lessons that I already understood well… My first concern was the possibility that my lack of background in the subject might affect the learners' understanding. Natatakot ako na baka mali ang maituro ko at maging sanhi ng miskonsepsyon ng mga bata (I was afraid I might teach the wrong thing and cause misconceptions among the children)." (P2, Social Sciences major)

Theme B: Apprehension Facing Unanswerable Student Queries

Beyond content delivery, participants reported intense vulnerability in spontaneous classroom interaction. Non-specialized teachers felt stripped of their authority as subject-matter experts when students asked questions they could not answer.

"Ang una kong naisip was, 'Kaya ko ba ito?' I was worried that students might ask questions that I could not answer. Kakahiya kung guro ka pero hindi mo sagot ang tanong sa mismong leksyon mo (It is embarrassing if you are the teacher but cannot answer questions about your own lesson)." (P15, Non-Science major teaching Science / Practical Research)

Part 3. Core Process: Pedagogical Bridging

Participants resolved Pedagogical Vulnerability through Pedagogical Bridging, a dynamic, four-stage social and instructional process through which teachers bridge the gap between their formal specialization and the demands of the assigned subject (Figure 1). The stages and their properties are summarized in Table 2 and described below.

Table 2
Categories and Properties of the Emergent Grounded Theory

Category	Description	Properties
Main concern: Pedagogical Vulnerability	Persistent anxiety, content mastery deficit, and fear of instructional compromise when teaching outside one's specialization	Epistemic Vulnerability (Fact-checking Lag; Spontaneous Query Exposure); apprehension facing unanswerable student queries
Stage 1: Rapid Content Acquisition	Pre-instructional, intensive self-directed study, digital curation, curriculum deconstruction, and rapid information synthesis	Epistemic Recognition; Need Mapping; Fast-Track Upskilling
Stage 2: Peer-Driven Synergizing	Collaborative strategy phase involving co-planning, consultation with subject-matter experts, and resource sharing to validate content	Strategy Formulation; Resource Alignment; Collegial Mentorship
Stage 3: Contextualized and Transparent Delivery	Classroom implementation using adaptive, learner-centered pedagogy, real-world contextualization, and open acknowledgment of knowledge limits	Responsive Teaching; Transparent Pedagogy; Adaptive Execution
Stage 4: Professional	Internalization of broad-spectrum adaptive competence; movement from	Outcome Evaluation; Reflective Refinement; Sustainable Growth

Category	Description	Properties
Identity Re-anchoring	reactive survival to confident instructional agency	

Stage 1: Rapid Content Acquisition (Individual Preparation)

To overcome content deficiencies, teachers engaged in exhaustive personal pre-work. They broke complex competencies into manageable units, pre-solved tasks, and performed trial demonstrations before delivery, often spending about twice the usual preparation time.

"Lesson preparation took much longer because I had to study the content and solve the problems myself first. Sobrang haba ng oras na kinakain sa paghahanda kasi doble ang aral ko (It took up so much time because I had to study twice as hard)." (P6, English major teaching General Mathematics)

"I made it a habit to explore the applications before introducing them to the students. I watched tutorials and practiced the procedures myself. Kinakailangan munang ako ang makagawa bago ko ipagawa sa kanila (I had to be able to do it myself before asking them to do it)." (P12, Filipino major teaching ICT / Empowerment Technologies)

Stage 2: Peer-Driven Synergizing (Social and Peer Support)

Recognizing the limits of self-study, teachers drew on institutional social capital through consultation with subject specialists, sharing of daily lesson logs (DLLs), and Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions.

"Consulting experienced Science teachers helped me the most. They could explain concepts that were difficult for me to understand. Malaking tulong ang pagtatanong sa mga tunay na major ng Science (Asking genuine Science majors was a huge help)." (P13, Social Studies major teaching Physical Science)

"Through our sharing in LAC sessions, I gained many insights that helped me improve my teaching. Hindi ka nag-iisa kasi willing ang co-teachers na magbahagi ng Daily Lesson Log at learning materials (You are not alone because co-teachers are willing to share DLLs and learning materials)." (P3, General Mathematics major teaching Oral Communication in Context)

P3 also cited formal trainings, seminars, workshops, and LAC sessions as sources of competence. Participants' accounts indicated, however, that one-time or generic training could not replace sustained access to a subject expert.

Stage 3: Contextualized and Transparent Delivery (In-Class Management)

During instruction, participants managed residual uncertainty by refusing to guess. They acknowledged when an answer required checking, recorded the question, consulted

reliable resources or specialists, and returned with a verified explanation. They also involved learners in inquiry, used multiple representations, and modified planned instruction when classroom evidence showed confusion or risk.

"I learned not to be ashamed to say that I needed to check something first… 'Let me verify that first before I give you an answer.' Mas maganda nang maging tapat kaysa magturo ng mali (It is better to be honest than to teach something wrong)." (P15)

"I take note of the question and avoid giving an answer based only on guesswork… This practice also teaches learners that checking information carefully is an important part of learning." (P2)

Stage 4: Professional Identity Re-anchoring

In the final stage, teachers reframed the non-specialized subject from a structural deficit into a demonstration of adaptive, broad-spectrum professional competence. Credibility was no longer equated with immediate omniscience but with responsible preparation, accurate follow-through, and responsiveness to evidence. The process was cyclical rather than linear, with outcome evaluation and reflective refinement feeding back into renewed content acquisition (Figure 1).

Part 4. Emergent Substantive Theory of Pedagogical Bridging

The emergent theory holds that when public senior high school teachers are assigned outside their specialization, they experience the recurring main concern of Pedagogical Vulnerability, which they address through the iterative process of Pedagogical Bridging. The process is conditioned by disciplinary proximity, preparation time, workload, access to subject specialists, availability of reliable resources, learner characteristics, infrastructure, and administrative support. The central proposition of the theory is that non-specialized teachers sustain responsible instruction by repeatedly converting disciplinary uncertainty into verified and teachable practice through self-directed relearning, socially supported validation, and transparent classroom inquiry, and that the quality and sustainability of this bridging depend on the institutional conditions surrounding the teacher.

Over repeated cycles, teachers' stance shifted from Scripted Survival, marked by rigid adherence to modules, heavy dependence on pre-made plans, and high anxiety, toward Adaptive Professional Mastery, marked by flexible facilitation, strategic selection of competencies, and pragmatic instructional confidence. Table 3 summarizes this developmental tendency.

Table 3
Developmental Trajectory of Non-Specialized Teachers Across Adaptation Phases

Dimension	Scripted Survival (Initial, 0–6 Months)	Intermediate Bridging (6–18 Months)	Adaptive Mastery (18+ Months)
Instructional Delivery	Rigid recitation of modules; heavy script reliance; minimal deviation	Guided delivery using supplemental digital media and peer lesson plans	Flexible, learner-centered facilitation with customized explanations
Question Management	High anxiety; defensive posture; fear of unanswerable student queries	Basic deferral; taking notes of queries for post-class investigation	Transparent inquiry; modeling active checking and joint discovery
Resource Utilization	Isolated self-study; high personal time consumption and stress	Active peer consultation; sharing DLLs in departmental networks	Strategic mentoring; contributing modified non-specialized resources in LAC

In the earliest period, teachers commonly relied on modules and scripts, avoided deviation, and invested substantial time in personal study. With repeated experience and access to support, they began using supplementary resources, consulting colleagues, and deferring uncertain questions for verification. More experienced participants described flexible explanations, modified activities, and joint inquiry with learners. P15 reflected on this adaptation:

"At the beginning, I was very dependent on the modules… Over time, as I learned the content better, I became more comfortable explaining concepts in my own words." (P15)

P5 similarly noted:

"As my content knowledge grew, I shifted from strictly following scripts to delivering more dynamic, confident lessons." (P5)

The data support a general progression, but it was neither automatic nor irreversible. Subject complexity, new curricular content, changing technology, heavier workload, and unavailable support could return even experienced teachers to scripted behavior. "Adaptive mastery" in this study therefore denotes a more workable capacity to prepare, verify, explain, and respond; it does not mean equivalence with formally specialized disciplinary expertise.

DISCUSSION

This study generated a substantive theory explaining how public senior high school teachers navigate instructional gaps in non-specialized assignments. The findings identify

Pedagogical Vulnerability as the participants' main concern and Pedagogical Bridging as the process by which it is resolved. In keeping with Classic Grounded Theory, the literature is used below as comparative data that enriches the emerged categories rather than as a framework that shaped them (Nathaniel, 2022).

Non-Specialized Assignment as a Systemic Deployment Condition

The participant profile supports treating non-specialized teaching as a systemic deployment condition rather than an individual deficiency. Hobbs and Porsch (2021) define the phenomenon through mismatch among assignment, preparation, certification, and specialization, and Bacus and Alda (2022), Mercado and Morante (2024), and Rodriguez (2025) associate it with curricular expansion, staffing constraints, and deployment realities in senior high school. That some assignments lasted eight years suggests that a mismatch initially justified as a staffing response may become normalized, a notable point given that Republic Act No. 10533 (2013) expanded specialized curricular offerings. The finding that the experience varies with the epistemic, pedagogical, technological, or performance demands of the subject extends the broad descriptions of difficulty reported by Anselmo and Anselmo (2024), Calaguas and Dungca (2025), and Candelario and Abo (2025): "non-specialized" is not a uniform experience.

Pedagogical Vulnerability as the Main Concern

Mercado and Morante (2024), Bugwak (2021), and Candelario and Abo (2025) similarly report that limited content knowledge increases uncertainty and makes preparation more demanding. The present data deepen this literature by showing that the central fear is consequential rather than merely personal: teachers worried about the durability of misinformation, especially in subjects where errors can affect later competencies. Participants' confidence weakened when they judged that they lacked the capability to explain, demonstrate, or defend unfamiliar content, which resonates with Bandura's (1986) account of self-efficacy and with studies linking non-specialized teaching to self-efficacy, professional self-esteem, coping, and job satisfaction (Beley, 2025; Capulong et al., 2026; Recede et al., 2023). Self-efficacy, however, was not imposed as the core category; diminished confidence emerged as one property of a broader concern about instructional adequacy. Fear of unanswerable questions also illustrates how perceived incompetence in a domain can push teachers toward defensive postures, as the Scripted Survival phase shows.

Pedagogical Bridging as a Four-Stage Process

Stage 1 is consistent with studies that identify preparation time, resource scarcity, training needs, and workload as recurring features of non-specialized teaching (Anselmo & Anselmo, 2024; Bacus & Alda, 2022; Calaguas & Dungca, 2025; Mercado & Morante, 2024) and with research showing that sustained demands without adequate time or support threaten teacher well-being (Agyapong et al., 2023; Antwi, 2026; Westphal et al., 2022). The present findings add that extra effort may temporarily protect lesson quality

but can also conceal the structural cost of misassignment, because successful delivery is achieved through uncompensated personal time.

Stage 2 reinforces studies associating mentoring, peer support, coaching, and professional development with teacher learning and efficacy (Lee et al., 2024; Recede et al., 2023; Täschner et al., 2024; Woodcock & Hardy, 2023) and complements work on relational and institutional resources in coping with professional demands (Concepcion, 2025; Ozoemena et al., 2021; Wabingga & Tomakin, 2024). In this study, collaboration was more than emotional reassurance; it functioned as a quality-control mechanism through which teachers verified content, anticipated errors, and developed teachable explanations. That generic training could not replace sustained access to a subject expert supports the emphasis of Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) and Lee et al. (2024) on professional learning tied to practice and ongoing coaching rather than isolated exposure.

Stage 3 shows that transparent pedagogy turns uncertainty from a threat to authority into a disciplined practice of verification. It protects learners from misinformation and models intellectual honesty, source checking, and continuous learning. Social Cognitive Theory helps sensitize interpretation of the confidence gained through successful experience, feedback, observation, and social support (Bandura, 1986), and Jud et al. (2025), Täschner et al. (2024), and Recede et al. (2023) show how efficacy develops through supported practice. Yet confidence alone did not resolve the mismatch: it became credible only when anchored in verification, adaptive explanation, and learner evidence.

The qualified interpretation of Stage 4 and of the developmental trajectory aligns with scholarship that treats teacher adaptation as dynamic, contextual, and relational (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Saldivar, 2024). It also corresponds with intervention-oriented self-efficacy research showing that confidence can be strengthened through successful practice, feedback, coaching, and professional learning but remains sensitive to task and context (Jud et al., 2025; Täschner et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023).

Distinctiveness of the Theory

Pedagogical Bridging differs from a simple coping model. Coping literature explains responses to perceived demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), resilience literature explains sustained functioning amid adversity (Hascher & Waber, 2021), and self-efficacy literature explains judgments of capability (Bandura, 1986). Pedagogical Bridging integrates but does not duplicate these ideas; its distinctive focus is the instructional conversion process through which teachers move from not-yet-secure knowledge to a verified lesson that learners can understand. The results echo prior evidence of difficulty and support needs while contributing an instructional-process explanation grounded in participants' actions.

Implications

Theoretically, the study advances Classic Grounded Theory scholarship in educational management by conceptualizing teacher adaptation not as a static trait or a stress-coping mechanism but as an active, continuous social-instructional process in which teacher agency and institutional social capital build workable instructional pathways under structural misalignment. Practically, school principals and department heads may use the three phases of the developmental trajectory (Scripted Survival, Intermediate Bridging, and Adaptive Mastery) as a diagnostic tool to assess readiness, tailor supervision, and target support, converting reactive problem-solving into a structured bridging system. For policy, the theory provides an empirical baseline for retooling aligned with Domain 1 (Content Knowledge and Pedagogy) of the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (Department of Education, 2017) and with Target 4.c of SDG 4 (Albert et al., 2023). It also bears on the senior high school curriculum context in which teacher specialization, curriculum alignment, and deployment intersect (Díaz, 2024; Fuentes, 2025; Laron, 2026). Speculatively, if non-specialized teaching continues to be normalized without policy attention, reliance on uncompensated preparation time and informal peer goodwill may risk teacher burnout and a gradual erosion of learning depth, particularly in STEM, specialized TVL, and core academic subjects; this possibility was not tested here.

Limitations

The findings rely primarily on participants' interview accounts, which are subject to self-reporting and recall. The study did not include classroom observation, experimental interventions, or measures of teaching effectiveness and student achievement. The theory is substantive and bounded to contexts similar to the Bataan public senior high schools studied, and it is not claimed to generalize to all educational systems.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn.

1. Non-specialized teaching in public senior high schools is primarily an instructional and professional challenge rooted in Pedagogical Vulnerability, the fear of imparting inaccurate content and losing instructional authority, rather than a mere administrative or workload adjustment. Subject-matter expertise is fundamental to teacher confidence and instructional integrity.

2. Structural deployment realities and staffing gaps shape how teachers adapt. Instructional difficulty appeared to ease where preparation time, institutional support, and subject-specialist mentorship were available, which indicates that individual teacher resilience cannot substitute for alignment between deployment and specialization.

3. Teachers continually mitigate pedagogical gaps through Pedagogical Bridging, an iterative social-instructional process of Rapid Content Acquisition, Peer-Driven

Synergizing, Contextualized and Transparent Delivery, and Professional Identity Re-anchoring. Successful navigation depends on a combination of self-directed relearning, peer collaboration, and transparent, inquiry-based classroom practice.

4. Professional growth and instructional confidence among non-specialized teachers are dynamic and developmental. Teachers can progress from scripted survival to adaptive practice, but this represents a pragmatic operational capability rather than disciplinary equivalence, which underscores the continuing need for specialized professional support.

Recommendations

Based on the properties and process of the theory of Pedagogical Bridging, the following recommendations are offered.

1. **For the Department of Education**. Shift division-level professional development from generic, mass-conducted seminars toward school-based, discipline-linked peer mentoring networks, and formally recognize informal peer coaching as valid Continuing Professional Development credit. Formulate guidelines for a structured grace period and targeted instructional support packages for teachers newly assigned to non-specialized subjects, rather than applying uniform performance evaluation metrics immediately upon deployment. Use the theory as an empirical baseline for retooling programs aligned with Domain 1 of the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (Department of Education, 2017).

2. **For School Heads and Division Administrators**. Adjust ancillary and administrative workload for teachers handling non-specialized subjects during their first year of assignment so that they have time for Rapid Content Acquisition. Prioritize assigning teachers to subjects with close conceptual proximity to their specialization (for example, a Physics major to General Mathematics rather than to Reading and Writing) to shorten the bridging trajectory.

3. **For Future Researchers**. Use theoretical sampling to test and refine the properties of Pedagogical Bridging across other contexts, including private basic education institutions and tertiary institutions, and conduct longitudinal grounded theory studies to observe how the stages evolve over multi-year assignments and whether prolonged non-specialized teaching strengthens or dilutes teacher retention.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethics clearance and official permissions were secured from the appropriate institutional and educational authorities before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained after participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits of the study. Participants could decline any question and withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected through participant codes in place of names, and school names

and identifying details were removed or generalized. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researchers and authorized advisers, and data were retained and disposed of according to institutional ethics policies.

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