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Understanding Teacher-Subject Mismatches in Integrated Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Challenges, Adaptive Strategies, and Implementation of Educational Quality

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ABSTRACT :

This study focuses on the experiences of teachers who taught subjects outside their specialization at integrated junior high schools. The objective of the study was to explore the problems and difficulties faced by teachers while teaching out of field, the outcome of teaching out of field on their performance as well as on students' learning process, and the strategies for overcoming the problems. The implications of the teacher-subject mismatch for the quality of instruction are analyzed, and the need for the program is justified. In the research, a phenomenological qualitative design was used to collect data from ten participants who have been working beyond their specialization using the Key Informant Interview and Colaizzi's phenomenological method. It was revealed that the teachers who taught subjects outside their specialization faced challenges with regard to mastering the subject, lesson planning and delivery, assessment, and classroom Management. Besides, the research shows that teachers also face extra demands in the form of time, energy, and preparation. However, it was shown that teachers adapted by means of research, collaboration with fellow teachers, and application of technological resources. It was found that teachers also see how important professional help is in dealing with new assignments. The research showed that the mismatch in the teacher's profession might have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the learning process. The study did not find a direct correlation between teaching subjects beyond specialization and students' academic performance. The researcher has proposed Project ALIGN to assist teachers in dealing with problems of teacher-subject mismatch. The study confirms the need to utilize professional development and mentoring programs to help teachers close the gap between the subject taught and the teacher's specialization.

Keywords: instructional quality, integrated schools, Project ALIGN, teacher specialization, teacher-subject mismatch, out-of-field teaching,

INTRODUCTION

Teacher-subject mismatch develops when the teacher handles a subject that does not conform to his or her education, expertise, experience, or training. While teachers are experienced in teaching, handling a different subject may require additional adjustments and preparations. Teachers might have to get acquainted with the new material, look for relevant teaching resources, communicate with other teachers, and devote more time to lesson preparation. On some occasions, teachers may face difficulties when it comes to some complex concepts, answering questions asked by students, or coming up with suitable assessment methods.

This issue is becoming more visible in the Philippines' education system. According to EDCOM 2 (2025), the significant majority (62%) of junior high school teachers have been assigned to teach subjects for which they do not have the qualifications or background to teach. What is more, the problem is particularly significant in physical sciences since 98% of teachers have been assigned to teach out of their specializations. Other subjects that face teacher-subject mismatch are Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (94%), biological sciences (80%), agriculture and fisheries, MAPEH, and Technology and Livelihood Education.

As well, Araling Panlipunan, science (both students and teachers), Filipino (86%), math (84%), and English (82%) subjects face teacher-subject mismatch (EDCOM 2, 2025). These numbers demonstrate that teacher-subject mismatch is not a single problem; it relates to other issues regarding the process of teacher recruitment, placement, scholarship programs, staffing practices, and the shortage of teachers.

According to EDCOM 2 (2025), the issue arises from the absence of sufficient supply-and-demand planning in teacher training. In some fields, although there may be many teachers, schools might still not find qualified people to teach science, mathematics, technical-vocational education, MAPEH, and values education. Since school administrators must continue with classes and comply with the curriculum requirements, they might be compelled to assign available teachers to subjects for which they did not have proper academic preparation.

This issue is critical because it can influence the quality of instruction received by students. The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (known as Republic Act No. 10533) laid down the groundwork for the K-12 Basic Education Program, whose objective was to enhance the Philippine education

quality and relevance. With the introduction of the K–12 education system, the demand for specialized teachers who master certain subjects (such as junior and senior high school) has increased.

Teachers are now obligated to provide a highly detailed and competency-driven learning experience, particularly in the domains requiring a high degree of technical knowledge. However, whenever the school does not have an adequate number of specialized teachers, teachers might be required to take classes in areas unrelated to their field of expertise. Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), adopted through Department of Education Order No. 42, series of 2017, highlights the significance of teachers' professional knowledge, subject knowledge, curriculum design, teaching techniques, and assessment methods.

This policy acknowledges that teachers have a pivotal role to play in making sure that learners receive the required knowledge, values, skills, and competencies that help them get through the basic education system successfully. At the same time, in line with Department of Education Order No. The implementation of the aforementioned policies continues to present challenges in teacher-subject matching in various schools.

For instance, Mejia et al. (2025) demonstrated that the implementation of teacher assignment policies is impacted by systemic barriers such as the insufficiency of teachers, limited specialized deployment, and problems related to recruitment and assignment processes. Some schools, particularly those situated far from urban centers, may have to provide teachers with several subjects, grade levels, or extra duties and responsibilities. This serves to increase teachers' workload and limits their time for adequate lesson preparation.

Guiaselon et al. (2022) analyzed the mismatch between teachers' qualifications and the subjects they teach in relation to students' performance on the National Achievement Test. Their findings demonstrate the importance of teachers' educational background, professional growth and development, training, and subject-related preparation for students' performance. In the research, Hwang and Kisida (2021) supported the conclusions regarding the effects of teachers' specialization on students' academic performance. These studies also underscore the implications of a mismatch between the subject taught and the teacher's expertise, which may influence the quality of education.

The qualitative research indicates that teachers find various ways out of the problems occurring due to non-specialization. Nemeño et al. (2023) conducted a phenomenological study with junior high school teachers to show that teachers encounter issues related to content mastery, lesson planning, confidence, communication, and teaching techniques. The researchers denoted these experiences relying on expressions of "the unexpected hustle", "the modern help", as well as "the proposal." Thus, teachers accepted these challenges through advanced studies, inquiry of colleagues, involvement in distance learning methods, meticulous preparation, and increasing creativity in their teaching methods.

Therefore, this research project, which is called Understanding Teacher-Subject Mismatches in Integrated Schools, has a goal of discovering the experiences of instructors who have been given an assignment to work in a sphere beyond their specialization. The given study aspires to supply answers to the questions connected with the obstacles teachers have, actions they take to deal with them in the proper way, and consequences of teacher-subject mismatch for the execution of education quality in integrated schools.

This research emphasizes the pressure of teachers related to teacher-subject mismatch, showing all the specifics of this problem. The information that it delivers could be used by educational managers, authorities, and stakeholders for designing educational policies contributing to an improvement of the presented methods of deploying teachers, professional training of teachers, mentoring processes, and providing educational institutions with all resources necessary for effective teacher education and assignment.

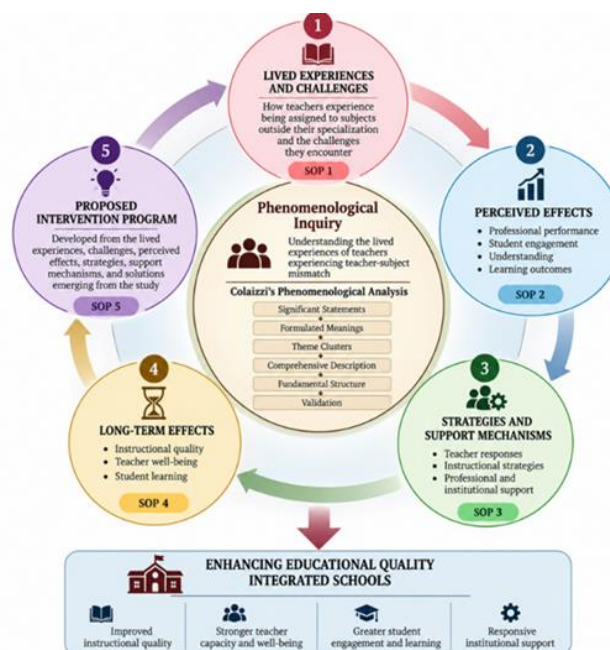


Figure 1. Research Paradigm

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The use of descriptive qualitative research design was justified as this method has a phenomenological orientation. Such a design allows the researcher to analyze how the participants perceived the mismatch between the subjects they had to teach and their specialization. By using Colaizzi's Matrix of Phenomenology Analysis, the researcher was able to create a systematic path connecting the participants' original quotations with the broader themes. This facilitated the keeping of connections between the interview answers, the meanings developed, the themes, and the final result of the given analysis. The selected methodology provided an in-depth understanding of the concept and its consequences for teachers, learners, and the educational process in integrated educational organizations.

Population and Sampling Technique

The population of the study involved the teachers of integrated schools in Tampakan District under the South Cotabato Schools Division. Schools provide education from elementary to secondary levels, which makes them appropriate for the study. There are difficult challenges due to a lack of teachers and a shortage of qualified teachers in specific subjects in the schools.

The selection of the sample involved the method of purposive sampling. This technique, it was possible to engage 10 teachers working in three integrated schools who sent their valuable data describing the impact of teacher-subject mismatch on lesson planning, instructional process, confidence level, workload, and the results of students' learning process. The study focused on 10 out-of-field teachers selected from a total pool of 23 educators across three institutions. This sample included five teachers from Taplan Integrated School (from a faculty of 11), four from Datal-Bio Integrated School (from a faculty of seven), and one from Lambayong Integrated School (from a faculty of five), all of whom shared firsthand experiences regarding their daily coping mechanisms and how teaching outside their specialization impacts overall education quality.

Research Instrument

The research was carried out using a specially developed semi-structured interview, which was used as a main instrument for gathering information concerning the experience, difficulties, changes, and needs of teachers involved in teaching subjects not aligned with their professional specialization in integrated schools. The development of the interview questionnaires was done in accordance with the five research questions, while the review of literature concerning teacher deployment, subject specialization, instructional efficiency, confidence, and student achievement contributed to this process.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The data collected from 10 teacher-participants were analyzed with Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. The information was received through Key Informant Interviews with 10 teachers who have direct experience of teaching subjects different from their preparation or specialization. Interviewing teachers produced in-depth descriptions of teacher-subject mismatches occurring in schools. The research sufficiently summarizes experiences associated with the five aspects of interest, which include a) lived experiences and problems in that connection; b) how people view the influence of the complicating factors on the quality of their work and that of students; c) what strategies and forms of assistance they apply; d) what possible implications the situation may entail in the long run on the quality of instruction, teachers' wellbeing, and students' results; e) what different ideas may be derived from the results of the study.

The analysis corresponded to the seven steps of Colaizzi's phenomenological process. (1) Getting acquainted with the Statements of the Participants, (2) The identification of important statements, (3) The following stage is the formulation of meanings, (4) Organization of Formulated Meanings Into Theme Clusters, (5) Creation of a Thorough Description, (6) Discovery of the Essential Structure of the Phenomenon and (7) Validation of Findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mismatch between teachers and their respective subjects brought up the issue of interrelated complexities in subject mastery, the lesson preparation process, and homework execution. The surveyed teachers faced problems when they had to teach subjects unrelated to their training. They had to deal with limitations that affected their knowledge of the subject, punctuality in terms of teaching processes, the need for longer lesson preparation time, and a greater number of required classes and numerous modifications. These results show that the issues of the mismatch between the teacher and the subject have more to do with the problems of the teacher not knowing the subject. Teachers' jobs became even more complicated because of the teaching approach implemented by the teachers, language, and class Management limitations.

In addition to the above-mentioned complications, the surveyed teachers had to deal with the uniqueness of their students, difficulties in their learning process and language comprehension, and the lack of teaching materials or educational facilities. Consequently, teachers had to adapt not only to strange subject content but also to the different needs and situations of the students they taught. Mismatch between teacher and content required teachers to be more creative, flexible, and intentional in their teaching practices. The study participants undertook unfamiliar teaching assignments by investing extra time in research, reading, lesson preparation, and searching for effective methods to teach complex content. They adjusted their teaching approaches to

both the subject content and the needs of their students. Their experiences demonstrated inventiveness, eagerness to learn, creativity, and commitment to making sure that their teaching is of high quality, regardless of the fact that they were teaching outside their subject area.

Teachers considered student-centered and diverse instructional approaches as useful in helping students get engaged and understand the material. The study participants used student-centered, differentiated, contextualized, interdisciplinary, interactive, and, where necessary, technology-based approaches to make their lessons easier to understand and relevant to the students. They believed that these changes helped to keep students engaged with the material. However, it should be noted that the findings are based on teachers' perceptions and cannot be interpreted as evidence that the mismatch resulted in improvement or a decrease in students' performance. Teachers managed the mismatch of their teaching subjects through constant professional development, collaboration with their colleagues, and the necessary teaching resources.

The participants relied not only on their previous knowledge while working with unfamiliar content. They began another research, reviewed relevant literature, contacted colleagues, looked for suggestions from others, discussed their teaching practices with others, and engaged in collaborative work. As far as instructional materials, the lesson plans, online tools, and other materials help participants prepare and deliver lessons, the results prove that fulfilling the task of teacher-subject mismatch is a process that needs both personal efforts and the support of peers and institutions. Teacher-subject mismatch is an ongoing professional and pedagogical need, not just a short-term classroom problem. According to the responses of the participants, it was clear that ensuring instructional quality when teaching outside the area of specialization required constant training, transformation of approaches, and cooperation with peers. The teachers had to keep updating their knowledge and improving the ways of teaching the subject matter. This means that teacher-subject mismatch can remain a permanent challenge as long as the mismatch issue is present in the teacher's responsibilities.

According to the results, one should conclude that there is more evidence about the professional sustainability than about the long-term psychological or emotional effects of teacher-subject mismatch. The participants named collaboration, consultations, trainings, feedback, instructional materials, and support from the school as crucial in coping with the ongoing instructional experience. At the same time, the information provided by the respondents does not contain any real evidence regarding the long-term psychological suffering of the faculty members. Hence, we cannot say that the issue of teacher-subject mismatch makes the teachers healthier and happier. 8. This definition defines the results in line with what the respondents' accounts really translate into. The participants recognized the importance of systematic teacher arrangements. The results pinpointed a number of requirements and put forward different solutions: specialization-oriented teacher placement, systematic placement and workload assessment, professional development, companionship and instructional support, proper provision of instructional materials, strengthened administration, continuous evaluation, and competency-oriented teacher placement. The respondents suggested that specialization should be taken into account whenever possible, and competencies, experience, readiness, workload, needs in professional development, and relevant staffing conditions should also be considered for placement decisions. The recommendations highlighted both preventive and supporting measures in relation to the issue of teacher-subject mismatch.

The combined results made it possible to plan a wide-scale intervention program aimed at remedying teacher-subject mismatch and improving educational quality in integrated schools.

The obtained data showed that it is possible to make the intervention effective in two major ways. In the first place, schools should aim at reducing entirely avoidable teacher-subject mismatch by improving teacher profiling, specialization, and competence-oriented placements, workload assessment, and workforce planning.

Within this scenario, when it is impossible to get rid of a mismatch due to staffing conditions, teachers should receive specific, targeted professional development opportunities, mentoring, support, relevant instructional materials, and assistance from administration, and continuous assessment of the process. Based on this evidence, it was possible to develop an intervention program that connects teacher placement with continuous support instead of passing the responsibility for dealing with subject mismatches to teachers. Based on the results, the authors proposed an intervention program called Project ALIGN.

CONCLUSION

Teacher-subject mismatch is more than a matter of assigning a teacher to an unfamiliar subject; it creates interconnected instructional and professional demands. Teachers are capable of adjusting to unfamiliar teaching assignments, but their ability to adapt should not be taken to mean that subject mismatch is without difficulty. Effective responses to teacher-subject mismatch depend on both individual effort and professional support. Teacher-subject mismatch becomes a continuing professional concern when the assignment extends over time. The study cannot make a definite conclusion about the long-term effects of teacher-subject mismatch on teacher wellbeing. Student engagement and understanding may be supported when teachers deliberately adapt their instruction to unfamiliar subject areas. Teacher-subject mismatch should not be treated solely as the responsibility of the individual teacher. A more systematic approach to teacher assignment can help reduce avoidable teacher-subject mismatch. When teacher-subject mismatch cannot be avoided, appropriate support becomes essential. The findings provide a clear basis for Project ALIGN (Advancing Learning through Instructional Growth, Networking, and Specialization) as the proposed intervention of the study.

School administrators may give careful consideration to teachers' academic specialization, qualifications, competencies, relevant teaching experience, readiness, and existing workload when preparing teaching assignments. Before teaching loads are finalized, possible mismatches may be reviewed to determine whether better alignment can be achieved within the school's available staffing. Department heads and subject coordinators may strengthen mentoring, coaching, collaborative lesson planning, and peer consultation for teachers handling subjects outside their specialization. Teachers may continue strengthening their knowledge and instructional practice through self-directed learning, professional development activities, consultation with

colleagues, Learning Action Cell sessions, peer collaboration, and the use of reliable subject-specific resources. Schools may provide targeted professional development based on the actual needs of teachers experiencing subject mismatch. Schools may make appropriate instructional materials readily available to teachers assigned outside their specialization. Teacher-subject assignment may be approached as a shared school responsibility rather than solely as an individual teacher concern. Schools may establish a regular process for reviewing teacher-subject assignments and the support provided to teachers experiencing a mismatch. Relevant education authorities may consider strengthening guidance and support mechanisms for teacher deployment, particularly in integrated schools where staffing limitations may contribute to subject mismatch. Future studies may examine teacher-subject mismatch in other school contexts, grade levels, learning areas, and geographical settings to determine whether similar experiences are observed. Quantitative or mixed-method studies may also investigate relationships among teacher-subject alignment, instructional practices, teacher outcomes, and student learning using appropriate measurable indicators. Based on the combined findings of the study, Project ALIGN (Advancing Learning through Instructional Growth, Networking, and Specialization) may be considered as the proposed school-based intervention for addressing teacher-subject mismatch in integrated schools.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The interview guide was submitted to validation by experts in the educational sector at the time of conducting the study; thus, professional educators and specialists were provided with the questionnaires for the evaluation of novice and earlier organized interviews. They provided their comments and suggestions on how to improve the questionnaires in terms of accuracy and compliance with the research objectives. The initial questionnaire was also tried on the teachers who had similar experiences; however, they were not included in the final respondents. The results assisted in checking whether the questions were clear, logical, and capable of providing useful information. The qualitative nature of the study resulted in the quality of the instrument being determined through expert evaluation, pilot testing, careful alignment with research questions, and consistent use of the interview guide. Therefore, credibility, relevance, and adequacy of the gathered data were ensured to conduct a thematic analysis of teacher-subject mismatch in integrated schools. Parties that conducted the key informant interviews carefully evaluated the interview guide developed by the researcher in order to ensure that questions were understandable, relevant, and consistent with the purpose of the study. At first, educational Management and research specialists assessed the interview questions to determine their organization, understanding, and ability to collect information concerning teacher-subject mismatch in integrated schools. After the expert opinion was acquired by the researcher, the necessary improvements were made in the questions regarding their wording, sequence, and focus. Certificates of validation were secured to prove that the instrument was subjected to the required academic assessment. The modified interview guide was forwarded for the final evaluation by the research adviser. In this case, the final review was conducted to ensure that the questions matched the five research questions, the qualitative research design, and the whole purpose of the study.

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