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Lost in Track: Exploring the Challenges Faced by Teachers with Mismatched Handled Subjects

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Authors:

¹Catherine V. Olid, MIB

Isulan National High School School

²Josevic F. Hurtada, PhD

DepEd Division of Sultan Kudarat

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of senior high school teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their area of specialization. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study involved fifteen (15) teachers from selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat during the School Year 2025–2026. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that teacher–subject mismatch significantly affects instructional quality and teacher well-being. Teachers experienced limited content mastery, reduced teaching confidence, and difficulty delivering clear and effective instruction. The mismatch also led to increased workload, requiring additional time for lesson preparation, research, and content familiarization. Moreover, participants reported experiencing emotional strain, including stress, anxiety, and self-doubt, which negatively impacted their teaching performance and classroom engagement. Despite these challenges, teachers employed various coping strategies such as self-directed learning, collaboration with colleagues, and the use of online resources. However, these strategies were insufficient without adequate institutional support. Participants emphasized the importance of mentoring programs, access to appropriate instructional materials, and continuous professional development. The study concludes that teacher–subject mismatch has significant implications for both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. It recommends aligning teaching assignments with teachers’ specialization and strengthening institutional support systems to enhance instructional quality and promote improved educational outcomes.

Keywords: teacher–subject mismatch, out-of-field teaching, senior high school, phenomenology, teacher well-being, student engagement



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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Teachers with mismatched subjects encounter difficulties mastering the subject matter, which may compromise teaching–learning process. In the Senior High School Department of selected secondary schools in Isulan, this challenge is evident as teachers assigned to subjects outside their specialization experience stress, reduced confidence, and require additional time for preparation and study to compensate for their lack of expertise. Instructional methods vary considerably across subjects, making it difficult for teachers to adapt effectively. This situation can result in poor student academic progress and diminished teacher performance and well-being.

In a global perspective, teachers handling subjects outside their area of specialization is a growing concern worldwide, affecting student engagement and learning outcomes across diverse education systems. Studies from countries like the Australia (Dixon et al., 2024), and Saudi Arabia (Alzahmi, 2024) reveal that mismatches often reduce instructional quality, student motivation, and academic success. In contrast, nations investing in teacher specialization and training report higher student engagement and better achievement (Amerstorfer & von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, teachers with mismatched subjects or out-of-field teaching remain a significant challenge, with approximately 60% of high school teachers assigned to subjects outside their area of specialization (Oracion, 2025).

This mismatch poses challenges to student engagement and learning outcomes, as teachers may lack content mastery crucial for effective instruction (Fajonyomi, 2007; Cahaya-IC, 2024). Despite some benefits, such as increased teacher flexibility, the negative effects on teaching quality and student performance highlight an urgent need to address this gap in educational outcomes (Barber & Mourshed, 2009; Naelgas & Maloniso, 2022). In Southern Mindanao's education system, teachers with mismatched subjects notably affect student engagement and learning outcomes. Studies in the region, such as in Maguindanao-I Division, reveal a considerable percentage of teachers handling subjects outside their specialization, particularly in English, which correlates with student performance in national assessments (Oracion, 2025). Moreover, classroom management and differentiated instruction have been shown to highlight the complex interplay of teaching practices amid mismatch challenges in Davao City schools (Aldanese & Limpot, 2023).

This study addressed the challenges faced by teachers who handled subjects outside their specialization, a phenomenon that directly impacts the quality of education delivered to learners. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) emphasizes ensuring inclusive, equitable, quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.



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However, one critical barrier to achieving SDG 4's mandate is the misalignment between teachers' expertise and the subjects they are assigned to teach, leading to compromised teaching and suboptimal student learning outcomes.

The primary goal of this study was to explore and document the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools under the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat. By identifying effective strategies and understanding the challenge, the study aimed to provide recommendations for better policies and support mechanisms that align teaching assignments with teacher specialization and improve educational outcomes.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore and document the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools in Isulan, under the Senior High School Department.

Specifically, the research problem was framed around the following key questions:

1. What are the experiences of Senior High School teachers in selected schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, who are teaching subjects outside their specialization?
2. What challenges do senior high school teachers face when teaching subjects outside their specialization?
3. How do teachers with mismatched subjects influence student engagement and academic performance in senior high school?
4. What strategies do senior high school teachers employ to manage teacher-subject mismatch, and how effective are these strategies in improving educational outcomes?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, specifically the phenomenological approach, to explore the experiences of senior high school teachers regarding the challenges of handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School in Isulan, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.

Phenomenological research is an approach that explores experiences for a more profound understanding of the interpretations of events. The underlying premise of this framework is that humans use a structure or essence to extract significance from their experiences. This study entails analysis and interpretation to understand the core expressed by participants in emotions, perceptions, and beliefs about the phenomena being examined. One crucial element of the



phenomenological research design is the researcher's responsibility to suspend any preexisting beliefs about the experience or phenomena in question (Delve & Limpaecher, 2012).

Respondents of the Study

Table 1 presents the participants' qualifications, determined by criteria established by the researcher before selecting eligible informants for the study.

Table 1 *Participants' Inclusion Criteria*

Qualifications
<i>Participants</i>
1. Teaching in senior high school - Only teachers currently handling senior high school subjects in Isulan National High School, Isulan, Sultan Kudarat will be included, as they are directly assigned to teach subjects beyond their area of specialization.
2. Minimum Three Years' Teaching Experience- Participants must have at least three years of teaching experience to guarantee they have sufficient background in handling subjects outside their specialization.
3. Informed Consent to Participate- Only teachers who voluntarily agree to share their lived experiences through interviews or focus group discussions, and who sign the informed consent form, will be part of the study to ensure ethical compliance and authentic narratives.

The study involved a total of fifteen (15) senior high school teachers from selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, who will meet the researcher's specified inclusion criteria.

Sampling Technique

During the conduct of this study, a purposive sampling technique was used to carefully select secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026, that met the specific inclusion criteria established by the researcher.

Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, constituted a variant of non-probability sampling. Within this approach, the researcher exercised judgment and discretion in selecting individuals from the population to participate in the study (Alchemer, 2021). This sampling required that the researcher possesses prior knowledge of the study's objectives to effectively identify and contact eligible participants, possibly through online survey platforms. Purposive sampling employed to gain access to a distinct subgroup of



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individuals, wherein all participants was carefully chosen based on their alignment with specific demographics or criteria.

Research Instruments

This research used a semi-structured interview as an investigative instrument, employing both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Its purpose was to explore the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool were substantiated through a rigorous evaluation by a panel of experts who possess expertise in the development of relevant research instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

To enhance the study, strict adherence to predetermined research protocols was maintained. The primary aim of this research was to explore the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects, particularly in the Senior High School Department of selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026.

In the preliminary stage, official approval was sought from both the Schools Division Superintendent of Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the College of EWMCI-Graduate Studies. Securing this approval was essential in obtaining the necessary permits for the researcher to conduct the study, underscoring the importance of ethical considerations.

Subsequently, a supplementary letter was sent to the school principal to solicit permission to access the data required for this research. A high-quality survey questionnaire was developed, validated, and administered to the intended participants.

The researcher used purposive sampling to select secondary school teachers as participants for this investigation. Under strict compliance with specific health protocols and procedures, the researcher proceeded with the implementation of interviews and FGDs, all conducted in-person.

The data from interviews and FGDs were organized, analyzed, and interpreted through thematic analysis. This methodology was expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the matters to be examined.



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Data Transcription Process

All gathered raw data from the participants through interviews and FGDs were transcribed using the transcription process of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). By following these step-by-step processes, the researcher aligned their transcription approach with the guidelines outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). This rigorous transcription process ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data, which served as the foundation for the subsequent narrative analysis and the meaningful interpretation of the gathered raw data.

These categories were either drawn from established frameworks or custom-crafted to align with the study's objectives. To execute this analytical process, a series of vital steps were meticulously followed:

Step 1: Data Organization and Preparation. In the initial phase, all data sources, including interview transcripts, notes from FGDs, and pertinent documents, were thoroughly organized and prepared for analysis. This step ensured the structured arrangement and accessibility of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Step 2: Data Immersion. Subsequently, the researcher deeply immersed herself in the data by reviewing interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process helped her understand the content and context inherent in the collected information (Nowell et al., 2017).

Step 3: Systematic Coding Process. The third step involved commencing a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes encapsulated fundamental concepts, ideas, or themes relating to challenges of handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School in Isulan, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.

Step 4: Clustering and Preliminary Themes. Following coding, the identified codes were clustered into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step established an initial framework for organizing the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Step 5: Theme Scrutiny and Refinement. Following this, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes were scrutinized and refined. Researchers ensured their coherence and clarity, making necessary adjustments as needed. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive label that succinctly represented its content, facilitating easy identification and interpretation (Terry et al., 2017).

Step 6: Linking Data Excerpts. Relevant data excerpts, such as quotations or segments from interviews and FGDs, were selected and linked to the themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes (Nowell et al., 2017).



Step 7: Thematic Analysis. Finally, the thematic analysis transcended superficial identification. Researchers delved into interpreting the significance and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives, ensuring a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

They identified patterns, correlations, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved challenges faced by teachers with mismatched handled subjects.

This meticulous and well-structured process of thematic analysis empowered researchers to investigate and comprehend the strategies systematically and approaches of teachers challenges of handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School in Isulan, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026. Ultimately, this approach yielded valuable insights contributing to the enhancement of intervention programs aimed at addressing the issues on the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools in Isulan, under the Senior High School Department.

Data Analysis

The present study aimed to explore the challenges faced by teachers handling mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Division of Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026. To achieve this objective, the researcher employed a content or thematic analysis approach to analyze the collected data. The approach described by Frick (2011, and Ngag, (2023) involved a systematic process of organizing textual components such as sentences, phrases, and words into categorized groups or categories. The data categorization was based on either pre-existing frameworks or specifically designed categories tailored to the research.

To execute this analytical technique, a series of crucial stages was meticulously followed. During the preliminary stage, several data sources, including interview transcripts, FGD notes, and relevant documents, were systematically organized and ready for analysis. This phase was crucial for ensuring systematic arrangement and ease of access to the data.

Following this, the researcher examined the transcripts and FGD notes to analyze the data. The immersive method facilitated a thorough comprehension of the content and context inherent in the acquired information.

The next phase involved commencing a systematic coding procedure. The code generation included relevant segments or patterns within the data.

The codes encapsulated essential concepts, ideas, or topics directly related to the challenges faced by teachers with mismatched subjects at selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.



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After the coding process, the identified codes were organized into preliminary themes based on their common meanings or significance. The objective of this stage was to establish an initial structure for organizing the data.

Subsequently, the emerging patterns and their corresponding categories underwent a rigorous process of review and refinement. The researcher-maintained consistency and clarity across the themes, making necessary revisions where appropriate.

Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive title that clearly conveyed the essence of the material it represented, thereby facilitating easy recognition and understanding.

Relevant data extracts, such as quotations or segments from the interviews and FGDs, were linked to the corresponding themes. These extracts served as supporting evidence to the themes that emerge from the analysis.

The thematic analysis went beyond simple topic identification. The researcher conducted an in-depth examination to understand the significance and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives.

This process included analyzing trends, correlations, and variations among the themes to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers with mismatched subjects in senior high school.

In conclusion, this methodology was expected to generate meaningful insights that could inform the development of intervention programs to address the challenges encountered by senior high school teachers handling subjects outside their specialization at selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.

Scope and Limitations

This study explored teachers' experiences with mismatched subjects in selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, using a purely qualitative research approach.

It aimed to capture the experiences, perceptions, and challenges encountered by Senior High School teachers, students, and school administrators, who were considered the primary beneficiaries of this study.

The scope included in-depth interviews and group discussions with (15) selected participants to gain insights into how mismatches affect teaching effectiveness, student engagement, and overall school performance.

The study was delimited to the context of selected secondary schools under the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat. It did not include quantitative measures such as test scores or statistical analyses. It was also limited to senior high school teachers currently affected by mismatches, excluding teachers and students from other schools or those who were not experiencing mismatched subjects. Additionally, the study focused on core academic subjects



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and did not address specialized areas such as technical-vocational education or extracurricular programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the school year 2025-2026, senior high school teachers in selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, faced significant challenges due to mismatched subjects handled within the Senior High School Department. These mismatches arose when teachers were assigned to subjects outside their areas of expertise, resulting in difficulties in delivering lessons effectively. This issue not only impacted on the quality of education but also placed undue stress on educators who were required to adapt to unfamiliar content.

In this study, a phenomenological approach was used to explore the challenges and opportunities of implementing differentiated instruction in selected senior high schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025-2026.

Purposive Sampling Technique was employed to carefully select senior high school teachers within selected secondary schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, who met the specific inclusion criteria established by the researcher.

Based on the results, teachers reported a significant decline in their classroom engagement due to insufficient subject expertise. This lack of subject mastery negatively affected their ability to effectively and engage students, leading to heightened self-doubt and diminished teaching efficacy.

These findings aligned with existing literature, which highlighted the correlation between content knowledge and teacher self-efficacy. The diverse approaches and challenges in managing such situations suggested subject-teacher alignment, professional development opportunities, and a review of staffing practices within the department, to ensure educators were better equipped to handle the demands of their teaching assignments. As a result, students may have experienced gaps in learning, as teachers struggled to meet the expectations of their assigned subjects.

Further, teachers consistently noted that teaching subjects outside their specialization required significantly more preparation time. The extra hours dedicated to lesson planning and material review contributed to increased stress and professional strain. This theme reinforced the idea that subject misalignment leads to a higher workload, affecting teacher well-being and work-life balance.

Furthermore, to overcome unfamiliar content, teachers relied on various coping strategies, such as using online resources, collaborating with colleagues, and seeking external professional guidance. This resourcefulness helped them manage the increased workload, but the heavy reliance on external support underscored the need for institutional backing, such as professional development opportunities.

The emotional toll of teaching subjects outside their expertise was significant, with teachers experiencing anxiety, stress, and a drop in motivation. These emotional challenges were



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linked to a lack of confidence in delivering lessons effectively, leading to emotional exhaustion teaching performance.

Generally, the study's findings highlighted the complex interplay of professional challenges and emotional strain of teachers when assigned to teach outside their area of expertise. These findings suggested that targeted professional development, improved institutional support, and collaborative teaching environments were crucial to helping teachers manage subject mismatches. By addressing these areas, selected schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat could improve both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.

Conclusion

The following inferences were made considering this study's findings.

The current instructional practices and approaches used by senior high school teachers in selected schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025-2026, highlighted significant challenges due to the mismatched subject assignments. Teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise faced difficulties in delivering lessons effectively, which not only impacted the quality of education but also placed undue stress on educators.

This misalignment between teachers' qualifications and their teaching assignments hindered their ability to communicate content clearly, resulting in a decline in both confidence and classroom engagement.

The study also revealed the emotional and psychological toll on teachers, as many experienced anxiety, stress, and a drop in motivation due to the challenges of teaching unfamiliar content. The emotional strain was linked to a lack of confidence in lesson delivery, contributing to emotional exhaustion and reduced teaching performance.

These findings emphasized the importance of providing emotional and psychological support to teachers in such situations, as their well-being affected classroom effectiveness.

Additionally, the teachers reported an increased workload, as teaching outside their specialization required significantly more preparation time. The extra hours spent on lesson planning and material review led to professional strain and a disruption in work-life balance. This finding further underscores the need for targeted professional development opportunities and improved subject-teacher alignment to reduce teachers' strain and enhance their teaching capabilities.

Considering these challenges, the study called for a comprehensive approach to addressing subject misalignment, including professional development, institutional support, and a collaborative teaching environment. By improving subject-teacher alignment and providing resources to succeed, schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, could enhance both teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes.



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It was influential that schools considered these findings to foster an environment that supported teachers in overcoming the challenges of teaching outside their area of expertise.

Recommendations

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

Based on the identified challenges faced by senior high school teachers in selected schools in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, here are recommendations for various stakeholders:

- 1. Policymakers and DepEd Officials:** Utilize teachers' deployment and needs analysis in hiring of teachers. Explore strategies for professional development opportunities to help teachers adapt to subjects outside their expertise. Investigate ways to align teachers' qualifications with their assigned subjects to reduce stress and improve instructional quality.
- 2. School Administrators:** Recommend teachers to be hired based on teachers' needs. Develop targeted professional development programs to support teachers in handling subjects outside their specialization. Explore collaborative teaching strategies and resources to help teachers effectively manage mismatched subject assignments and improve student learning outcomes.
- 3. Teachers:** Provide professional development opportunities to strengthen their subject expertise and teaching strategies. Foster a collaborative environment where teachers can share resources and support one another in managing unfamiliar content. Advocate for better alignment between teachers' qualifications and their subject assignments to improve both teacher confidence and student learning.
- 4. Future Researchers:** Conduct similar studies to explore the challenges of other teachers assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise. Investigate how mismatched subject assignments affect teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Exploring the support systems and professional development needs for these teachers could provide valuable insights into improving the situation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Before initiating this research, it was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations in exploring the challenges encountered by senior high school teachers handling subjects outside their specialization at selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026. To ensure the proper implementation of the study, the research plans and proposals were submitted to East-West Mindanao Colleges, Inc. for review and approval.

This step guaranteed strict compliance with established rules and regulations. Consequently, the following ethical principles will be given prominence:

Informed Consent:



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Before participation, consent was obtained from all school heads involved in the study. They must possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits. Furthermore, participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing the participants to withdraw from the study at any juncture without adverse consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: To safeguard the identities and responses, rigorous measures were put in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Rather than using actual names, pseudonyms or codes were used to uphold the participants' privacy. The collected data was securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

Avoiding Harm: Delicate subjects, such as the challenges inherent in their roles, were discussed with meticulous consideration for the potential emotional and psychological impact on the participants. Strategies were in place to minimize distress, and a support system was readily available to assist participants should the need arise.

Researcher-Participant Relationship: The researcher maintained a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Any actions that may harm the participants were scrupulously avoided, ensuring their utmost dignity and respect throughout the research process.

Data Protection: Adherence to data protection regulations and laws was followed to safeguard the participants' personal information. Stringent measures were employed to ensure secure storage and transmission of data.

Voluntary Participation: Participants were assured that their involvement in the study was voluntary, devoid of any coercion or external pressure.

Researcher Bias: The researcher remained vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, upholding objectivity and transparency throughout the research endeavor.

Institutional Approval: Before initiating the study, the researcher sought ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees.

Honesty and Integrity: The research findings were reported truthfully and accurately, free from manipulation or distortion to align with preconceived notions or biases.

Beneficence: The potential benefits of the research in educational practices and policies were thoughtfully considered, ensuring that the study contributes to the education system.



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Cultural Sensitivity: The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices within the research setting, refraining from imposing external values on participants.

Inclusion and Diversity: By upholding these ethical principles, the study was conducted conscientiously, with full regard for the rights and welfare of the participating teachers. Moreover, it contributed valuable insights to the field of education, particularly within the unique context of the Department of Education (DepEd)–Sultan Kudarat, on selected secondary schools, particularly in the Senior High School Department in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat, for the academic year 2025–2026.

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Declaration AI Tools Utilization

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

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