

Original Article

From Secondary to Primary: Lived Experiences of Non-Elementary Education Graduates Teaching Elementary Learners

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of non-elementary education graduates who taught elementary learners in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City. Ten teachers participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and the transcripts were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis to surface shared meanings across participants. Three clusters of challenges emerged: sustained behavior management demands that required close attention and consistent routines, constant parental monitoring that interrupted instruction and increased pressure, and the need to adapt curriculum and teaching approaches to younger learners. Teachers responded through coping practices that included proactive routines and positive reinforcement, clear boundary-setting for parent communication, and child-centered instructional adjustments such as chunking content, using visuals, and integrating brief interactive activities. Participants also described insights that reflected professional growth in flexibility, stronger appreciation of developmental differences, and strengthened resilience. Findings highlight how out-of-field deployment across year levels reshapes teacher identity and daily practice, and they point to the need for targeted induction, mentoring, and professional development that supports elementary pedagogy and home-school partnership protocols.

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1. Introduction

Teacher deployment that assigns educators outside their area of initial preparation remains a persistent concern in many systems, particularly when shortages and uneven distribution lead schools to fill posts through cross-level or cross-subject placement. Research commonly describes this practice as out-of-field teaching, a condition in which teachers hold responsibility for learning areas or year levels for which formal preparation is limited. Studies associate out-of-field placement with increased workload, constrained instructional repertoire, and challenges to teacher confidence and identity, especially when the assignment requires unfamiliar pedagogy and classroom routines (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; du Plessis et al., 2014). In science education, for example, scholars describe out-of-field teaching as an overlooked but persistent problem because it creates gaps between teachers' preparation and the knowledge and practices needed for effective instruction (Luft et al., 2020).

Elementary classrooms place distinctive demands on instruction, behavior support, and relationship work. Early-grade learners often show high energy, short attention spans, and strong needs for structure and reinforcement. Effective elementary teaching therefore requires deliberate routines, clear expectations, and responsive strategies that keep learning active and concrete. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that classroom management interventions yield small but meaningful improvements in academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and motivational outcomes in primary education settings, which underscores the central role of management and routine in young learners' learning conditions (Korpershoek et al., 2025). When teachers trained for secondary or other specializations enter elementary classrooms, the transition can generate role ambiguity because prior professional scripts may center on subject delivery rather than foundational skill building and continual behavior guidance (du Plessis et al., 2014).

Home-school relationships further shape the everyday realities of elementary teaching. Active parental engagement can support learning, yet frequent parent communication can also create pressure, interruptions, and parent-related stress. Large-scale evidence suggests that time spent communicating with parents relates to higher teacher self-efficacy but also heightened parent-related stress, and that professional development focused on parent-teacher collaboration can lessen harmful stress effects (Yang et al., 2025). Other work on parental engagement in primary education shows that teacher perceptions and patterns of communication vary, which can influence how classroom time and teacher attention are distributed across instructional and relational tasks (Monfrance et al., 2025).

In the Philippine setting, schools may rely on non-elementary education graduates to cover elementary classes when staffing gaps appear or when teacher deployment does not match local demand. While discussions of teacher quality often emphasize curriculum reforms, assessment systems, and professional standards, fewer empirical accounts document how cross-level placement reshapes teachers' day-to-

day practice, emotional labor, and sense of professional competence. Understanding this transition matters because teacher well-being relates to teacher-student relationships, retention, and student outcomes, which makes the working conditions of out-of-field teachers a relevant concern for school improvement (Dreer et al., 2023).

Phenomenology provides an appropriate lens for examining these issues because it centers the meanings that participants attribute to lived experience. By foregrounding teacher narratives, phenomenological inquiry can illuminate how out-of-field year-level assignment is enacted through classroom management decisions, instructional adaptation, and interactions with parents and school leaders. Such evidence can guide induction design, mentoring structures, and protocols that protect instructional time while strengthening home-school partnership practices.

This study explored the lived experiences of non-elementary education graduates teaching elementary learners in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City. It examined the challenges they encountered, the coping strategies they employed, and the professional insights they gained through the transition. By documenting these experiences, the study aims to contribute evidence that can guide teacher deployment decisions, targeted professional development, and support systems that enable teachers to provide developmentally responsive instruction in elementary classrooms.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design to understand the meanings that non-elementary education graduates attributed to their experiences while teaching elementary learners. Phenomenology was selected because it supports systematic exploration of how participants interpret and make sense of a shared phenomenon, with emphasis on rich description and the structures of experience.

Participants were ten teachers assigned to elementary classes in Tibungco District, Division of Davao City, whose undergraduate preparation was outside elementary education. Purposive sampling identified teachers who had direct experience with year-level transition and who could articulate the challenges and practices that emerged during their assignment. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. To support confidentiality, the study used participant codes (P1 to P10) in all transcripts and reports.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview guide aligned with the study aims and followed recommended phases for developing a rigorous semi-structured protocol, including using prior literature to define domains, drafting questions, pilot refinement, and clarity checks (Kallio et al., 2016). Content validation involved consultation with qualified reviewers who evaluated relevance and clarity, after which the researcher refined wording to reduce ambiguity and increase alignment with the phenomenon under investigation.

Interviews were conducted at times and locations that minimized disruption to teachers' schedules. With participant permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The researcher reviewed transcripts for accuracy and

completeness and returned summaries of key points to participants to support interpretive credibility.

Data analysis used reflexive thematic analysis to develop patterns of shared meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved repeated familiarization with transcripts, initial coding of relevant segments, iterative development of candidate themes, refinement for coherence and distinctiveness, and final definition of themes that addressed the study aims. The analytic process followed contemporary guidance that emphasizes conceptual alignment, transparent decision-making, and reflexive engagement with interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Trustworthiness was supported through strategies that strengthened credibility, dependability, and confirmability. These strategies included an audit trail of analytic decisions, peer debriefing on theme development, and participant checks on the accuracy of summarized meanings. Ethical safeguards included confidentiality procedures, secure storage of audio files and transcripts, and reporting practices that avoided identifiable details.

3. Results

3.1 Challenges

Theme 1: Behavior Management and Sustained Attention Demands

Teachers described young learners as highly energetic and easily distracted, which required constant redirection and close monitoring during instruction. They reported that limited attention spans and inconsistent compliance with directions disrupted lesson flow and made classroom order difficult to sustain. They mentioned:

"Elementary students are very energetic, and it's hard to keep their attention during lessons." (P1)

"Sometimes they get easily distracted, which makes it challenging to maintain order in class." (P3)

"It is very difficult because sometimes they do not listen to instructions and they get distracted easily." (P5)

Theme 2: Parental Monitoring and Instructional Interruptions

Teachers reported frequent parent check-ins during school hours, which created pressure and interrupted instruction. They explained that responding to parent messages and visits while managing pupils reduced instructional focus and increased stress. They stated:

"Some parents are always checking on their children, like during class hours, and even during lunch or free time, which makes it hard to teach without distractions." (P2)

"Parents often call or message to ask about small issues, and it interrupts the flow of my lesson" (P6)

"It is very difficult because some parents keep monitoring while I teach, and since I have many pupils, it affects my class; I realized that this is what elementary teaching is like." (P7)

Theme 3: Curriculum and Instructional Adaptation for Younger Learners

Teachers emphasized that planning for elementary learners required major adjustments in language level, pacing, and teaching approach. They reported difficulty simplifying concepts and shifting from a high school-oriented style to developmentally appropriate elementary instruction. They verbalized:

"Designing lessons for younger students is very different; I often struggle to simplify concepts without losing the key points." (P2)

"Sometimes, I feel unprepared because the teaching methods I learned in college don't always apply to elementary learners." (P4)

"It is very difficult to adjust lesson plans from the teaching style I was used to in high school to an elementary level." (P9)

3.2 Coping Strategies

Theme 1: Proactive Routines and Positive Reinforcement

Teachers described using games, storytelling, praise, and rewards to reduce disruptive behavior and sustain engagement. They also reported that varied short activities supported attention and helped pupils follow directions. They mentioned:

"I use interactive games and storytelling to keep students engaged and prevent disruptive behavior." (P1)

"Reward systems and praise help encourage good behavior, which makes teaching smoother." (P4)

"I use visual aids and short activities so they do not get distracted and can focus on the lesson." (P7)

Theme 2: Boundary Setting for Parent Communication

Teachers managed parent pressure by clarifying communication windows and redirecting non-urgent concerns to scheduled updates and conferences. They

emphasized that respectful boundary-setting reduced interruptions and protected instructional time. They verbalized:

"I set specific times for parent inquiries, so it doesn't interrupt my teaching." (P2)

"I explain to parents that certain questions can be answered after class or during conferences." (P3)

"I told parents that their questions can be raised during scheduled updates so the class is not affected." (P5)

Theme 3: Child-Centered Lesson Design and Scaffolding

Teachers adjusted instruction by breaking content into smaller steps and relying on visuals, demonstrations, and interactive tasks. They explained that these adaptations improved comprehension and participation among elementary learners. They stated:

"I break down complex concepts into smaller, manageable steps for younger students." (P1)

"Using visual aids and demonstrations helps students grasp ideas faster than lectures alone." (P6)

"I created lesson plans that are interactive and easy for children to understand." (P9)

3.3 Insights

Theme 1: Professional Growth through Flexibility

Teachers described the transition as a source of growth that strengthened patience, flexibility, and skill in simplifying ideas. They reported that repeated adjustment improved their confidence and expanded their instructional repertoire. They mentioned:

"Teaching elementary students taught me to be more patient and flexible with my teaching style." (P2)

"I learned to simplify complex ideas and make learning enjoyable, which strengthened my instructional skills." (P5)

"I learned a lot from teaching children, especially in explaining concepts and engaging the class." (P7)

Theme 2: Stronger Grasp of Developmental Differences

Teachers reported clearer understanding that elementary learners require more guidance, reinforcement, and age-appropriate activities than secondary learners. They emphasized that awareness of developmental level helped them design more engaging lessons. They verbalized:

"I realized that younger students need more guidance and reinforcement compared to high school learners." (P1)

"Understanding their developmental stage helps me design lessons that are age-appropriate and engaging." (P4)

"I understand now that the approach for children is different from the approach for high school students." (P6)

Theme 3: Resilience and Rapid Adjustment in Practice

Teachers described resilience as essential for responding to unexpected classroom situations and diverse learning needs. They noted that quick problem-solving and flexible planning helped them maintain instruction despite disruption. They stated:

"I learned to stay calm and find solutions quickly when unexpected situations arise in class." (P1)

"Adaptability has been key to handling different personalities and learning styles effectively." (P3)

"Sometimes, I need to adjust the plan right away when students do not follow." (P5)

4. Discussion

This study highlights how cross-level out-of-field placement can reshape teachers' practice through three intersecting pressures: intensive behavior management, parent related interruption, and instructional adaptation to younger learners. These pressures align with international work that describes out-of-field teaching as a boundary crossing experience that requires teachers to learn new practices while managing uncertainty about competence and role expectations (Hobbs & Porsch, 2021; du Plessis et al., 2014). For participants, the shift to elementary classrooms demanded not only content adjustment but also continual regulation of classroom routines, attention, and socio-emotional support, which are central conditions for learning in early grades.

Teachers' accounts of high energy behavior and frequent distraction reflect developmental realities of young learners and reinforce why classroom management is core to elementary teaching. The updated meta-analysis of classroom management

interventions in primary education reports small but significant improvements across academic and behavioral outcomes, suggesting that structured management practices can support both learning and classroom climate (Korpershoek et al., 2025). In the present study, teachers relied on interactive activities, praise, and reward systems, which align with evidence that proactive routines and positive reinforcement contribute to orderly environments where instruction can proceed without constant disruption.

A second contribution of this study concerns parent related interruption and monitoring. Participants described frequent check-ins as a stressor that competed with instructional time, which echoes recent evidence that parent communication can simultaneously support teacher efficacy and raise parent-related stress (Yang et al., 2025). In settings where parents have strong expectations for immediate updates, teachers may experience additional emotional labor as they attempt to remain responsive while sustaining lesson flow. The boundary-setting strategies described in this study, such as scheduled updates and conferences, mirror recommendations that schools clarify communication norms and provide professional development that strengthens collaboration while protecting instructional time (Monfrance et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025).

The third pressure involved curriculum and instructional adaptation. Participants reported that their prior preparation did not fully equip them to simplify content, pace instruction for younger learners, or design activities that translate abstract concepts into concrete tasks. This finding supports the view that out-of-field assignment is not only a content mismatch but also a pedagogical mismatch, especially when teachers move across year levels with distinct developmental demands (du Plessis et al., 2014). In response, teachers described scaffolding through chunked explanations, visuals, demonstrations, and interactive lesson design, which reflects foundational principles of developmentally responsive pedagogy in elementary settings.

Across coping practices and insights, teachers described identity-related growth in flexibility, patience, and resilience. Such growth is consistent with scholarship that links teacher well-being and adaptive capacity to sustained effectiveness and student outcomes (Dreer et al., 2023). Participants framed resilience as a practical skill that supported rapid adjustment when plans failed, which suggests that resilience develops not only through individual traits but also through repeated opportunities to reflect, seek support, and learn new routines in context. Targeted induction and mentoring may accelerate this growth by providing models of elementary classroom management, lesson design, and parent communication protocols.

For practice, the findings suggest that schools that deploy non-elementary education graduates into elementary posts should provide structured supports rather than assuming general teaching competence will transfer without modification. Short, focused professional development on early-grade pedagogy, classroom management routines, and child development can address the pedagogical gap that participants

described. Mentoring from experienced elementary teachers can also provide situated guidance and reduce reliance on trial-and-error learning, which may protect teacher well-being and student learning time.

For policy, the results indicate that teacher deployment decisions should consider year-level preparedness and the support demands of early-grade teaching. When out-of-field placement is unavoidable, clear workload expectations, protected collaboration time, and school-wide communication norms with parents may reduce disruption and stress. These supports can help schools preserve instructional quality while honoring parent engagement as a partnership that benefits learners.

Finally, this study extends the literature by offering a contextualized account of out-of-field year-level transition in an elementary setting. The themes show that the experience involves simultaneous pedagogical adaptation and relationship management, and that teacher learning is shaped by classroom realities and home-school dynamics. Future research may examine how mentoring models, induction structures, and communication policies influence teacher adaptation and student outcomes in similar contexts.

5. Conclusion

Non-elementary education graduates assigned to elementary classrooms described a transition defined by intensive behavior management demands, parent-related interruptions, and the need for developmentally appropriate instructional adaptation. They coped through proactive routines and reinforcement, boundary-setting for parent communication, and child-centered lesson scaffolding, and they gained insights that strengthened flexibility, developmental awareness, and resilience. Schools can support successful adaptation by providing targeted induction, mentoring, and professional development focused on elementary pedagogy and structured home-school communication protocols.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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