



TEACHERS WITHOUT CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF SKILL PRESERVATION AMONG INEXPERIENCED BOARD PASSERS

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ABSTRACT

The transition from pre-service education to professional teaching is frequently disrupted for newly licensed educators in the Philippines due to systemic deployment delays. This qualitative phenomenological study explores how inexperienced Secondary Social Sciences board passers, currently awaiting deployment on the Registry of Qualified Applicants (RQA), navigate self-directed skill preservation while excluded from formal teaching environments. Through semi-structured interviews with ten purposively sampled participants and subsequent reflexive thematic analysis, the study identifies a pervasive decline in practical instructional design confidence, despite the retention of theoretical knowledge. To mitigate pedagogical skill decay without a physical classroom, participants exhibit significant resourcefulness through self-directed upskilling, academic extension, and collaborative material development. However, these efforts are heavily constrained by institutional lockout from official educational resources and the psychological burden of unvalidated labor and isolation. Ultimately, this prolonged state of professional limbo fractures the educators' professional identities, replacing vocational idealism with the temptation of pragmatic attrition. To prevent the loss of qualified educators, the study recommends implementing provisional institutional support and transitional mentorship programs to sustain their pedagogical competencies during the hiring queue.

KEYWORDS: Skill Preservation, Pedagogical Atrophy, Deployment Delays, Professional Identity, Self-Directed Learning, Phenomenological Research, Registry of Qualified Applicants (RQA)

INTRODUCTION

The transition from pre-service education to professional teaching is a critical phase characterized by the complex development of an educator's professional identity. According to Situated Learning Theory, professional learning and identity formation require "legitimate peripheral participation" within an active community of practice (Kaynak, 2024; Lave & Wenger, 1991). For novice teachers, the development of a professional self heavily depends on the physical classrooms they are placed within and their daily engagements with students, peers, and administrators (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Dotger & Smith, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006). However, for many newly licensed educators in the Philippines, this vital immersion is disrupted. Passing the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT) does not immediately guarantee classroom employment, thereby isolating inexperienced board passers from the structured communities of practice essential for their professional growth (Kaynak, 2024; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the Philippine public school system, systemic bureaucratic processes often result in a prolonged waiting period between licensure and deployment. The Department of Education (DepEd) hiring guidelines (e.g., DepEd Order No. 7, s. 2015; DepEd Order No. 007, s. 2023) require applicants to undergo a rigorous evaluation of their demonstration teaching and specialized skills to be placed on the Registry of Qualified Applicants (RQA). Recent local tracer studies indicate that the timeline from graduation to actual deployment frequently leaves graduates waiting for job opportunities in public schools to formally exercise their careers (Agbayani-Pineda, 2025;

David et al., 2018; Lucman, 2020). This enforced academic gap creates a highly competitive "waiting pool" of fully licensed, ready-to-teach educators who lack the physical space necessary to practice and refine their pedagogical skills (Agbayani-Pineda, 2025; Orbe, Espinosa, & Datukan, 2018).

Without continuous, situated practice, these newly licensed teachers are highly susceptible to skill obsolescence and atrophy. Skill decay is broadly defined as the loss or degradation of trained or acquired skills—including knowledge—after periods of non-use (Arthur, Bennett, Stanush, & McNelly, 1998; Bearman, 2024). While traditional research heavily documents manual skill degradation due to non-use or automation (Rashid & Rötting, 2021), emerging educational and cognitive literature emphasizes that complex pedagogical capabilities decay rapidly without active classroom engagement (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Jex & Britt, 2014; Kim & Seo, 2022). For early-career educators, exclusion from formal in-service support leaves them to navigate the preservation of their instructional strategies entirely independently. The absence of institutional anchors—such as mentorship from experienced colleagues or formal exposure to recent educational reforms like the MATATAG curriculum updates—can significantly diminish their instructional agility, self-efficacy, and long-term commitment to the teaching profession (Boyle & Eastwood, 2018; Flin, O'Connor, & Crichton, 2008).

To counteract the degradation of pedagogical competencies during deployment delays, unemployed or transitional educators increasingly rely on informal, self-directed learning and the formation of professional learning



networks (PLNs). PLNs are uniquely crafted, dynamic learning ecosystems composed of people, spaces, and tools that meet an educator's specific professional needs and goals (Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016). Studies have shown that teachers utilize these networks and social technologies strategically to access informal learning, gather feedback, and maintain engagement with the broader educational community outside of formal institutional structures (Carpenter, Krutka, & Trust, 2021; Couros, 2010; Prestridge, 2019; Visser, Evering, & Barrett, 2014). Such agentic, self-directed professional learning allows novice educators to exercise autonomy and mitigate skill decay while navigating the uncertainties of the hiring queue (Couros & Hildebrandt, 2016; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010).

While extensive academic literature explores the lived experiences of pre-service teachers during their supervised practicum placements, and local studies extensively document the administrative realities of the DepEd hiring process, there remains a distinct empirical gap. Little qualitative research exists connecting these two realities to understand exactly how fully licensed but currently unemployed educators experience this waiting period. To address this gap, this qualitative study explores the self-directed strategies employed by inexperienced Secondary Social Sciences board passers to preserve their pedagogical skills while awaiting deployment in a local Division Office's RQA. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate:

1. How applicants perceive and describe their current confidence levels regarding instructional design and lesson planning outside of a formal teaching environment.
2. The specific methods, alternative activities, and resources applicants utilize to maintain and update their pedagogical knowledge.
3. The institutional, environmental, and personal barriers encountered during these self-directed skill preservation efforts.
4. The overarching impact of prolonged deployment delays on the applicants' professional identity and their motivation to remain in the education sector.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of newly licensed teachers awaiting deployment. Phenomenology was highly appropriate for this study because it provides a deep understanding of how individuals consciously experience a specific phenomenon—in this case, the period of professional waiting and self-directed skill preservation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on the applicants' lived perspectives, this design allowed for a nuanced, non-experimental investigation of their instructional confidence, pedagogical strategies, and professional identity development outside of traditional classroom settings.

Participants and Sampling

The researcher employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). To

directly align with the study's objectives, the inclusion criteria for the participants are as follows:

- Fully licensed educators who have passed the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers (LEPT).
- Specialized in Secondary Social Sciences.
- Currently included in the Registry of Qualified Applicants (RQA) in the Schools Division of Eastern Samar.
- Unemployed or not employed in any formal classroom teaching capacity during School Year 2025-2026.

A sample size of 10 participants were selected. This range is generally sufficient to achieve data saturation in phenomenological studies, ensuring that no new themes emerge from additional interviews regarding their self-directed strategies and barriers (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This qualitative method uses a predetermined but flexible interview guide, allowing the researcher to pursue emergent topics and deeply explore the specific alternative activities, resources, and institutional barriers the applicants faced (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The interview guide was structured chronologically around the study's four primary objectives, moving from general perceptions of instructional design confidence to the specific impacts on long-term professional identity. Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the widely adopted six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is theoretically flexible and well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within rich qualitative data. The analytical phases included:

- Familiarizing with the data through active and repeated reading of the transcripts.
- Generating initial, systemic codes across the entire dataset.
- Searching for broader, overarching themes that capture the methods of skill preservation and perceived environmental barriers.
- Reviewing and refining themes against the coded extracts.
- Defining and naming final themes related to professional identity and motivation.
- Producing the final analytical report mapping back to the research objectives.

RESULTS

This section presents the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews with ten inexperienced board passers currently awaiting teaching deployment. The findings are organized according to the research objectives.



Theme 1: The Atrophy of Practical Application and Pedagogical Confidence

The thematic analysis revealed a prevalent sense of declining confidence among participants regarding their ability to design effective lessons. While all participants had successfully passed the licensure examination, they expressed a shared sentiment that theoretical knowledge rapidly decays without the anchor of a physical classroom. The data highlighted a stark disconnect between knowing the principles of instructional design and feeling capable of executing them.

The Abstraction of Lesson Planning

A majority of the participants (8 out of 10) reported that crafting lesson plans outside of a formal teaching environment felt increasingly abstract. Without real students to assess, participants struggled to gauge the pacing, cognitive load, and appropriateness of their instructional materials.

Participant 3 articulated this frustration, describing lesson planning without a classroom as a hollow exercise:

"Right after I passed the boards, I felt like I could design a curriculum from scratch. But as the months went by, drafting a lesson plan started to feel like writing a script for a play that will never be performed. I know the parts of the plan—the objectives, the motivation, the evaluation—but I second-guess myself constantly because I don't have actual students to tell me if the activities are too hard or too boring."

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 7, who noted that the absence of a classroom environment removed the feedback loop necessary for building confidence in instructional design:

"When you are practice teaching, you know immediately if your lesson design failed because the students look confused. You adjust. Now, I try to write modules or draft lesson plans just to keep my skills sharp, but I have no idea if they are actually good. That uncertainty really eats at your confidence."

Clinging to Theoretical Frameworks

Despite a general decline in practical confidence, a nuanced finding emerged regarding theoretical knowledge. While participants doubted their execution, several maintained confidence in their understanding of core educational frameworks. They could easily recall theories, but struggled with the transition from theory to practice.

Participant 5 highlighted this distinction between knowing the theory and trusting the design process:

"If you ask me about constructivism or Bloom's Taxonomy, I can explain it perfectly. The board exam made sure of that. But if you ask me to design a week-long scaffolded lesson for a Grade 7 Araling Panlipunan class right now? I would freeze. The theoretical confidence is there, but the instructional design confidence is slowly fading away."

In summary, the prolonged absence from a formal educational setting profoundly impacts the confidence of inexperienced board passers. Their experiences suggest that instructional design is not perceived as a static skill that can be preserved through memory alone, but rather a dynamic practice that requires continuous interaction with learners to remain robust.

Theme 2: Resourcefulness in Limbo: Self-Directed Strategies for Pedagogical Maintenance

When exploring how participants maintained their pedagogical knowledge without a formal classroom, the thematic analysis revealed a strong, intrinsic drive toward self-directed professional development. Rather than passively waiting for deployment, participants demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness. The data indicates that these inexperienced board passers actively sought out alternative academic arenas and digital upskilling platforms to preserve, and in some cases enhance, their professional teaching competencies.

Academic Extension and Collaborative Material Development A prominent strategy among the participants was the redirection of their instructional energy into their own continuing education and peer support networks. Several participants reported that their enrollment in graduate school provided a vital surrogate environment for teaching. Furthermore, they actively designed instructional materials not for financial gain, but to support practicing teachers, thereby keeping their own lesson planning skills practically grounded.

Participant 2 provided a rich description of how graduate studies and peer collaboration served as a substitute for live instruction:

"Since I don't have my own advisory class yet, I channel all that instructional energy into my graduate studies. Whenever I am assigned a report or a demonstration in my Master's classes, I don't just create standard presentation slides. I deliberately design comprehensive, interactive PowerPoint modules as if I were teaching a real Senior High School class. I apply all the scaffolding techniques we learned. Beyond that, I've started sharing these slide decks and module outlines with my former college classmates who are already deployed in the field. Seeing them use my materials in their actual classrooms—and hearing their feedback on how the students reacted—gives me a profound sense of pedagogical validation. It keeps my lesson planning skills sharp, practical, and highly relevant, even if I am operating from the sidelines."

Similarly, Participant 6 detailed how the act of building learning materials served as a rigorous mental exercise to prevent theoretical decay:

"You have to find intentional ways to keep the 'teacher' part of your brain actively engaged, otherwise the foundational knowledge just stagnates. For me, that meant diving deeply into curriculum mapping and module development on my own time. I take the newly released curriculum guides and challenge myself to build out comprehensive daily lesson logs and supplementary digital resources. It's a highly analytical process. When I am structuring a digital assessment or designing visual aids, I am actively forcing myself to apply the pedagogical theories from our undergraduate training. It is certainly a different environment than managing the behavioral dynamics of a live classroom, but it compels me to continually analyze how complex information should be properly scaffolded for diverse learners."

Upskilling Through Micro-Credentials and Intentional Self-Study Beyond material development, the data highlighted a significant reliance on independent digital upskilling. Recognizing that the modern educational landscape is rapidly evolving, many participants viewed their deployment delay not as a setback, but as a strategic window to bridge the gap



between their traditional university training and contemporary instructional demands.

Participant 8 captured this proactive mindset, emphasizing the pursuit of specialized certifications to maintain a competitive professional edge:

"The reality of waiting for a teaching item is that it can feel incredibly stagnant if you let it. To counter that, I realized I needed to treat this waiting period as a self-directed extension of my formal education. I noticed during my practice teaching that my undergraduate training was highly theoretical, but sometimes lacked the practical integration of digital tools required in today's classrooms. So, I started enrolling in online certification courses specifically focused on instructional design, multimedia learning, and digital course writing. I am essentially reverse-engineering my professional development. By mastering back-end educational tools and advanced instructional strategies now, I am ensuring that when I finally step into a physical classroom, my technical and pedagogical capabilities are actually far more advanced than on the day I passed the board exam."

In summary, the findings illustrate that inexperienced board passers employ highly intentional strategies to combat pedagogical atrophy. By leveraging the academic rigor of graduate school, developing materials for peer educators, and pursuing targeted digital upskilling, these applicants transform a period of professional limbo into a season of robust, self-directed preparation.

Theme 3: The Friction of Isolation: Systemic and Psychological Barriers to Professional Growth

While participants exhibited high levels of resourcefulness, the thematic analysis revealed that self-directed skill preservation is an arduous process fraught with significant challenges. The data highlighted a convergence of institutional, environmental, and personal barriers that constantly threaten to derail the applicants' efforts. These barriers manifest primarily as a sense of systemic disenfranchisement and the heavy psychological toll of performing invisible, unvalidated labor.

Systemic Lockout and Resource Scarcity

A predominant institutional barrier cited by nearly all participants (9 out of 10) was the lack of access to official educational resources and professional development communities. Because they are not yet officially affiliated with a school or the Department of Education, participants found themselves locked out of vital institutional support systems, premium learning management systems (LMS), and official curriculum training seminars.

Participant 4 eloquently described this experience of professional exclusion, highlighting the difficulty of aligning their self-study with current standards:

"The hardest part about trying to stay sharp is feeling like an outsider to your own profession. I have this deep drive to align my self-study with the newest curriculum updates, but so many of the official training modules, specialized seminars, and even premium educational software accounts are strictly reserved for active, employed teachers. I often have to rely on second-hand information from my employed peers or scavenge for whatever fragmented resources are publicly available

online. It is incredibly frustrating to have the motivation to improve, only to hit an 'employees-only' barrier or a financial paywall at every turn. You are essentially asked to stay ready for the battlefield without being allowed access to the armory."

This systemic lockout extends to the environment as well. Without the structured, resource-rich environment of a faculty room or a school library, participants noted that the physical and financial constraints of working from home—such as unstable internet connections and the inability to afford paid instructional design courses out-of-pocket—severely limited the scope of their upskilling efforts.

The Psychological Weight of Unvalidated Effort

Beyond the institutional roadblocks, the data strongly indicated that the most debilitating barriers were deeply personal and psychological. Operating in a professional vacuum requires immense self-regulation. Participants described the emotional exhaustion of constantly self-motivating without the external validation, feedback, or sense of purpose that a live classroom naturally provides. This isolation frequently gave rise to bouts of imposter syndrome and motivational fatigue.

Participant 9 provided a highly introspective account of this internal battle, articulating the emotional toll of designing materials that have no immediate audience:

"There is a very heavy, hidden emotional toll to this kind of self-directed learning. When you are actually working in a school, the environment itself propels you forward—the daily schedule, the students' questions, the collaborative chatter in the faculty room. But at home, working on a digital module or a lesson plan all by myself, the silence is deafening. Motivation becomes a grueling daily battle. I frequently catch myself pausing and thinking, 'Why am I spending hours perfecting this rubric? Who is even going to see it?' The isolation breeds a very specific kind of imposter syndrome. I have my teaching license framed on the wall, but without a classroom of my own, I have to wake up every single day and mentally convince myself that I am still a legitimate educator."

In summary, the findings reveal that the journey of an inexperienced board passer is heavily impeded by their status as institutional outsiders. The lack of access to official professional communities and resources, compounded by the psychological exhaustion of unvalidated effort, creates a steep uphill battle for these individuals as they attempt to independently sustain their pedagogical competence.

Theme 4: Identity in Flux: The Erosion of Vocation and the Temptation of Pragmatic Attrition

The culmination of the thematic analysis addressed the overarching impact of prolonged deployment delays on the participants. The data revealed that waiting for a formal teaching position is not merely a logistical inconvenience; it is a profound existential challenge that fractures the applicants' professional identity. As months or years pass without classroom placement, participants experience a painful transition from viewing education as an idealistic "calling" to viewing it through a lens of pragmatic survival, leading to a precarious motivation to remain in the sector.



The Cognitive Dissonance of the "Paper Teacher"

A recurring sub-theme (present in all 10 interviews) was the psychological dissonance between holding a professional license and the inability to practice the profession. Participants described how their identity as an "educator" was initially solidified by passing the licensure exam, but steadily deteriorated as they remained sidelined. Without the daily rituals of the profession—waking up early for flag ceremony, interacting with students, being addressed as "Teacher" or "Sir/Ma'am"—their professional identity felt illegitimate.

Participant 1 provided a deeply introspective account of this identity crisis, highlighting the shame and grief associated with unfulfilled potential:

"When the board exam results came out and I saw my name, I felt an overwhelming sense of arrival. I was finally a teacher. But as the deployment delays stretched from months into over a year, that triumphant identity began to rot. Now, whenever family members or former classmates ask me, 'Where are you teaching right now?', I feel this intense, burning shame having to explain the ranking system and why I am still waiting. You start to feel like an imposter in your own life. I have the PRC license in my wallet, I have the theoretical knowledge in my head, but because I do not have a physical classroom, I feel like a 'paper teacher.' The identity of an educator is not something you can just hold in your mind; it has to be performed and validated by students. Without them, I am constantly questioning who I actually am professionally. The longer I wait, the more the title of 'teacher' feels like a costume I am not allowed to wear."

The Collision of Idealism and Economic Reality

The prolonged wait not only eroded their identity but severely destabilized their motivation to stay in the education sector. The data indicated that the initial passion and vocational commitment of these inexperienced board passers are constantly being tested by economic realities. The participants expressed a growing temptation to abandon the public education system entirely in favor of corporate roles, the BPO industry, or overseas opportunities that offer immediate employment and financial stability.

Participant 10 articulated this agonizing crossroad, illustrating how systemic delays force applicants to weigh their passion for teaching against the urgent demands of adulthood:

"When I was in university, teaching was my absolute calling. I swore I would never work in any other industry. I was ready to serve. But idealism does not pay the bills, and passion cannot sustain you through two years of waiting for a teaching item to open up. Lately, the temptation to just give up and pivot to a corporate job or take a high-paying virtual assistant role is paralyzing. I see my peers from other degree programs getting promoted, starting families, and moving forward with their lives, while I am financially and professionally paralyzed, just holding my breath for a text message from the division office. The saddest part is that my passion for teaching hasn't died, but my patience with the system has run out. It is a heartbreaking realization: I am slowly being starved out of the profession I love. I am realizing that I might have to abandon my dream of teaching, not because I am not qualified, but simply because I can no longer afford to wait."

In conclusion, these findings paint a sobering picture of the collateral damage caused by deployment delays. The lack of immediate absorption into the educational workforce does more than stall a career; it actively dismantles the professional identity of newly minted educators. Ultimately, this prolonged state of professional limbo risks driving a highly qualified, passionate cohort of teachers out of the education sector before they ever have the chance to step inside a classroom.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore how inexperienced Secondary Social Sciences board passers navigate skill preservation during prolonged deployment delays. The findings reveal a complex duality: while newly licensed educators demonstrate remarkable resourcefulness through self-directed upskilling, they simultaneously battle significant systemic exclusion and a deteriorating professional identity.

Skill Decay and the Absence of Situated Practice

The thematic finding regarding the "atrophy of practical application" strongly corroborates existing literature on cognitive skill decay. Consistent with the frameworks provided by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) and Kim and Seo (2022), the participants' experiences confirm that complex pedagogical capabilities—such as live instructional design and curriculum mapping—degrade rapidly without continuous, situated practice. Because these newly licensed educators are excluded from formal classrooms, they are denied the "legitimate peripheral participation" described by Lave and Wenger (1991). The data highlights that theoretical knowledge is insufficient to sustain professional confidence when the feedback loop of live student interaction is missing.

Agency Through Informal Professional Learning Networks

To counteract this pedagogical atrophy, participants engaged in highly intentional, self-directed strategies for maintenance, such as developing materials for peers and pursuing micro-credentials. This behavior reflects the modern utility of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) as alternative spaces for growth. As Trust, Krutka, and Carpenter (2016) and Prestridge (2019) suggest, when formal institutional structures fail to provide immediate support, educators will agentially leverage social technologies and peer networks to fulfill their professional needs. By pivoting to alternative academic arenas, these board passers mitigate their skill obsolescence while navigating the uncertainties of the hiring queue.

Systemic Lockout and Identity Erosion

Despite their proactive efforts, the participants faced immense "friction of isolation" that ultimately resulted in their professional "identity in flux". The systemic bureaucratic delays embedded in the Department of Education's hiring guidelines (e.g., DepEd Order No. 007, s. 2023) not only create a highly competitive waiting pool (Agbayani-Pineda, 2025; Lucman, 2020), but effectively lock qualified applicants out of essential in-service training and official curriculum resources. Consequently, the inability to perform the daily rituals of teaching actively fractures their professional identity. This



supports Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop's (2004) and Flores and Day's (2006) assertions that a teacher's professional self relies heavily on active contextual engagement within a school community. Ultimately, this state of professional limbo creates a high risk of "pragmatic attrition," where economic realities force passionate educators to abandon the sector entirely.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study carry significant implications for educational policymakers and Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs):

- **Provisional Institutional Support:** To prevent the "brain drain" of qualified teachers, the Department of Education could consider granting applicants currently listed on the Registry of Qualified Applicants (RQA) provisional access to official learning management systems or allowing them to audit district-wide in-service training (INSET).
- **Alumni Bridge Programs:** TEIs could develop transitional mentorship programs or "bridge" communities of practice to structurally support their alumni during the waiting period, ensuring they remain updated on major reforms like the MATATAG curriculum.

Limitations

While this study provides deep insights into the lived experiences of waiting applicants, it is limited by its phenomenological design. The data was drawn from a purposive sample of ten Secondary Social Sciences teachers within a single local Division Office. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized across all subject specializations or geographic regions in the Philippines. Future research could utilize a mixed-methods approach to quantify the rate of skill decay among a larger cohort of RQA applicants.

Conclusion

Passing the Licensure Examination for Professional Teachers is a monumental milestone, yet this study demonstrates that it is only the beginning of a precarious professional transition. When inexperienced board passers are subjected to prolonged deployment delays, they are forced to wage a solitary, self-directed battle against pedagogical atrophy. If the education sector wishes to retain its most passionate and qualified new teachers, systemic adjustments must be made to integrate them into professional learning communities long before they officially step into a classroom.

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