

# Overqualified or Misplaced: Lived Experiences of Language Teachers Defying Degree–Career Misalignment

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## ABSTRACT

Degree–career alignment is increasingly emphasized in the Philippine basic education system; however, many language education teachers pursue advanced degrees that do not fully match their current classroom roles. Within a policy environment that promotes merit and competency-based career progression and rewards advanced qualifications, alongside persistent specialization mismatch noted by EDCOM II, such misalignment raises questions about motivation, professional strain, and identity. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of language education teachers who are working in Language Education while pursuing or holding graduate degrees in management and leadership.

Using a phenomenological approach, data were gathered through a semi-structured Google Form from 15 language education teachers at Malaybalay City National Science High School to examine their reasons for pursuing non-aligned degrees, the challenges they encounter, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the advice they offer others. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes. The most frequently reported was Functional and Relational Friction (93.30%), followed by Personal Evolution and Strategic Career Versatility (86.70%), Transformative Adaptation and Knowledge Synthesis (80.00%), and Strategic Narrative Building and Proactive Alignment (66.70%). Teachers viewed their misaligned degrees as long-term investments in professional growth, flexibility, and credibility, yet they experienced theory–practice gaps, role ambiguity, and identity strain. At the same time, they actively translated leadership concepts into their work, bridged skill gaps through self-directed learning and mentoring, and crafted narratives that frame their combined expertise as a professional edge. Overall, degree–career misalignment emerged as a multifaceted condition shaped by policy reforms, institutional expectations, and teachers' own strategies, generating both friction and opportunities for expanded professional identity and practice.

**Keywords:** degree–career misalignment, language education teachers, phenomenology, professional identity, leadership preparation

## INTRODUCTION

In the Philippine basic education context, teachers with advanced preparation in language education are increasingly positioned within a system that values both instructional specialization and managerial competence. Recent reforms by the Department of Education (DepEd), particularly the Expanded Career Progression System for Teachers and School Heads, emphasize merit and competency-based promotion pathways that reward advanced degrees, performance, and demonstrated professional accomplishments rather than length of service alone (DepEd, 2025). At the same time, national reports by the Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) highlight persistent skills and specialization mismatches, where professionals often occupy roles misaligned with their training, pointing to structural issues in education-to-workforce alignment (EDCOM II, 2026). Within this environment, language education teachers who pursue master's or doctoral degrees in language-related fields may be motivated by aspirations for career advancement, professional recognition, or intellectual growth, yet increasingly find themselves steered into leadership and administrative positions where

their disciplinary expertise is only partially recognized or directly used.

This shift reveals a critical theory–practice gap in which academic trajectories and practical work roles move in different directions. International evidence shows that administrative pressure can significantly undermine teachers’ professional identity, chiefly by reducing job satisfaction and increasing burnout, although supportive interpersonal relationships can buffer these negative effects (Zhu & Zhai, 2025). In the Philippine context, DepEd Order No. 2, s. 2024, formally seeks to remove administrative tasks from teachers so they can concentrate on teaching and student engagement, assigning most clerical and non-instructional functions to school heads and non-teaching personnel (DepEd, 2024). Yet, in practice, language education teachers who transition into management or coordination roles frequently encounter professional friction as they reinterpret themselves from pedagogical specialists into administrative generalists, navigating expectations that do not always match their prior training or classroom identity.

Recent studies and policy discussions indicate that this misalignment has tangible implications for everyday work and long-term growth. Local research on language teachers in public secondary schools found that participative leadership practices are generally high, professional development levels are also high, and there is a significant positive relationship between the two, suggesting that inclusive leadership can support teacher growth when conditions are favorable (Morimoto & Baguio, 2025). However, EDCOM II’s analyses and the evolving DepEd career framework continue to surface cases where teachers’ specialization and their assigned responsibilities diverge, raising concerns about underutilized expertise, role overload, and constrained opportunities to apply advanced academic learning in authentic instructional or leadership practice. For language education teachers whose graduate studies emphasize discourse, literacy, and second-language development, the dominance of generic administrative tasks can amplify day-to-day professional challenges and heighten identity strain.

The present study therefore investigates how such misalignment is experienced and negotiated by language education teachers who pursue degrees that do not fully align with their current or evolving career paths. Specifically, it seeks to understand the underlying motivations for undertaking advanced study outside one’s immediate role, the concrete professional challenges that arise when academic work and workplace demands diverge, and the coping mechanisms and strategies teachers employ to navigate this friction. By examining these lived experiences, the study also aims to generate strategic, context-sensitive recommendations for minimizing the negative impact of degree–career misalignment on professional identity, well-being, and educational quality, particularly within DepEd’s reforming landscape.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of language education teachers whose advanced academic preparation does not fully align with their current or evolving roles in the education system. This approach was chosen to capture participants’ personal perspectives, motivations, and interpretations related to pursuing non-aligned degrees, managing professional challenges, and negotiating identity shifts between pedagogical specialization and administrative or leadership responsibilities.

The study was conducted at Malaybalay City National Science High School, a public secondary school under the Department of Education (DepEd) located in Aglayan, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon. The school offers secondary programs in which language education teachers handle both subject teaching and various ancillary, coordination, or leadership tasks within the school context covered by recent DepEd reforms on administrative task removal and career progression.

The participants consisted of 15 language teachers who either had completed or were currently pursuing a master’s or doctoral degree in leadership and management and who were simultaneously performing coordination, administrative, or leadership roles. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that only language teachers whose academic specialization in leadership and management was not fully aligned with their teaching responsibilities in language education were included, allowing for rich descriptions of their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and insights regarding this professional friction, consistent with phenomenological

inquiries on mismatched teachers and role transitions.

Data were gathered through a semi-structured Google Form, which contained open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions on underlying motivations, specific professional challenges, coping mechanisms, and suggested strategies. Responses were exported, organized, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, categories, and themes related to degree–career misalignment and professional identity. Thematic analysis involved systematic coding of significant statements, clustering similar codes into broader themes, and refining these themes to capture the essence of participants' shared and unique experiences, with credibility supported through careful documentation of the analytic process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative responses of the 15 participants regarding their experiences of working in Language Education while pursuing advanced degrees in Management and Leadership. Four major themes emerged, reflecting their motivations, professional challenges, coping strategies, and strategic insights about degree–career misalignment.

**Table 1. Major Themes and Frequencies (n = 15)**

Theme	Frequency	% of Respondents
Personal Evolution and Strategic Career Versatility	13	86.70%
Functional and Relational Friction	14	93.30%
Transformative Adaptation and Knowledge Synthesis	12	80.00%
Strategic Narrative Building and Proactive Alignment	10	66.70%

The findings of this study show that degree–career misalignment among language education teachers is closely intertwined with policy reforms, evolving leadership expectations, and teachers' own efforts to make sense of their professional trajectories within the education system.

### Theme 1: Personal Evolution and Strategic Career Versatility

Personal evolution and strategic career versatility emerged as a central theme, reported by 13 of 15 participants (86.70%), indicating that a large majority viewed their management and leadership-oriented degrees as a long-term investment in their professional growth rather than as a requirement of their immediate teaching role. They emphasized intrinsic motivations such as personal growth, intellectual challenge, and the desire to expand their future options.

Participants described their advanced studies as a way to avoid professional stagnation, to be seen as more credible and competent, and to prepare for potential leadership or coordination roles. They framed their decisions through a belief that careers are rarely linear, highlighting transferable skills, critical thinking, research, leadership mindset, and analytical abilities, as valuable across roles, whether in the classroom or in administrative positions.

This pattern suggests that misalignment is not necessarily perceived as a misstep; rather, it can be a calculated response to a system that increasingly rewards advanced qualifications and leadership potential. In a context where career progression is tied to merit and competency, teachers anticipate that having a leadership-oriented degree will position them advantageously for future roles, even if their current assignment remains primarily instructional.

These motivations are consistent with DepEd's Expanded Career Progression System, which explicitly emphasizes merit and competency-based pathways and gives weight to advanced degrees and demonstrated accomplishments in professional advancement (DepEd, 2025). They also reflect the broader environment described by EDCOM II, where professionals often work in roles that are not perfectly aligned with their original training, prompting them to seek additional qualifications that can enhance long-term career flexibility (EDCOM

II, 2026). Together, these sources support the claim that language education teachers pursue misaligned degrees as a strategic response to institutional expectations and structural mismatches.

### **Theme 2: Functional and Relational Friction**

Functional and relational friction was the most frequently reported theme, identified by 14 of 15 participants (93.30%), underscoring that almost all respondents experienced some form of theory–practice gap as they attempted to reconcile graduate coursework in management and leadership with the practical demands of language teaching and school operations.

Functionally, participants struggled to translate abstract leadership frameworks into concrete tasks such as classroom management, documentation, and school-based processes, leading to feelings of a competency void in certain operational areas. Relationally, some teachers felt caught between being seen as classroom specialists and emerging leaders, and they reported subtle tensions with colleagues or supervisors who interpreted their leadership focused studies as a possible distraction from core teaching responsibilities. Cognitively, participants described conflict between a research-intensive mindset developed in graduate school and the expectation for rapid, pragmatic decisions in school settings, which at times led to reduced confidence and confusion about their professional identity.

These experiences indicate that misalignment is not only an issue of content mismatch but also a source of identity and relational strain. Teachers are asked to function in spaces where their advanced training is not fully utilized and where role expectations are ambiguous, which can undermine their sense of professional coherence and satisfaction. The gap between what they are trained to do and what they are actually tasked to perform deepens the theory–practice divide in their daily work.

This finding aligns with (Zhu & Zhai, 2025) observation that administrative pressures and role demands can significantly weaken teachers' professional identity by reducing job satisfaction and increasing burnout, even when supportive relationships help buffer these effects. In the Philippine context, DepEd Order No. 2, s. 2024, acknowledges the burden of administrative tasks and formally seeks to remove these from teachers so they can focus on teaching and student engagement, assigning clerical and non-instructional functions to school heads and non-teaching personnel (DepEd, 2024). However, the continued reports of friction in this study suggest that, despite such policies, many language education teachers still find themselves pulled into administrative and coordination roles, reinforcing the kind of misalignment and identity strain highlighted in EDCOM II's discussions of specialization and role mismatch (EDCOM II, 2026).

### **Theme 3: Transformative Adaptation and Knowledge Synthesis**

Transformative adaptation and knowledge synthesis emerged as a key theme for 12 of 15 participants (80.00%), who described how they gradually moved from feeling divided between their degree and their job to seeing themselves as more integrated professionals who actively bridge the gap between the two.

Teachers reported intentionally applying leadership and management concepts, such as instructional leadership, organizational change, and strategic planning to improve their departments, mentor colleagues, and enhance language programs. They engaged in proactive skill bridging through self-study, online learning, and seeking mentorship from school heads or coordinators to make their academic training more relevant to their roles. In addition, they relied on strategic resource management, including careful time-planning and prioritization, to balance work and graduate study without severely compromising performance in either area.

These strategies show that teachers are not passive recipients of misalignment but active agents who reinterpret and repurpose their learning to fit their context. Through intentional knowledge translation and skill bridging, they create hybrid professional identities that combine pedagogical expertise with emerging leadership competencies. This process reduces the perceived distance between their academic and practical worlds and suggests that misalignment, when navigated intentionally, can foster broader professional growth.

The potential for constructive leadership growth within teaching roles is supported by (Morimoto & Baguio,

2025) study, which found that participative leadership practices and professional development among language teachers in public secondary schools are both high and significantly related. This underscores how leadership engagement can enhance teachers' professional growth when context and support are favorable. At the same time, EDCOM II's identification of specialization and role mismatches (EDCOM II, 2026) and DepEd's evolving career frameworks (DepEd, 2025) highlight the structural pressures that make such adaptive work necessary. The present findings suggest that, in response, teachers actively synthesize their academic and workplace experiences to carve out more integrated professional roles.

#### **Theme 4: Strategic Narrative Building and Proactive Alignment**

Strategic narrative building and proactive alignment was reported by 10 of 15 participants (66.70%), emerging as a forward-looking theme as teachers articulated advice and strategies for minimizing the negative impact of degree-career misalignment on themselves and on others who may follow a similar path.

Participants stressed the importance of clarifying personal goals before enrolling in a program, warning against pursuing advanced degrees solely for prestige or external pressure. They recommended anticipating skill gaps early and seeking targeted professional development through trainings, certifications, or practical leadership roles to complement their academic preparation. A central strategy was crafting a strong professional narrative that highlights transferable skills and frames their combination of language teaching and leadership studies as a professional edge rather than a weakness.

These insights suggest that teachers recognize misalignment as a manageable, and even potentially advantageous, condition when approached deliberately. By taking ownership of their story and planning for alignment between their learning and practice, they reshape how others perceive their qualifications and how they themselves understand their role within the system. This narrative and strategic work helps transform misalignment from a source of doubt into a platform for differentiated contribution.

This proactive stance aligns with the broader reform context in which leadership, advanced qualifications, and expanded responsibilities are increasingly emphasized in career progression for teachers and school heads (DepEd, 2025). It also resonates with EDCOM II's call for better alignment between training, placement, and role expectations, which implies a need for both systemic changes and individual strategies to make advanced preparation meaningful in practice (EDCOM II, 2026). Furthermore, the emphasis on protecting professional identity and well-being amid administrative pressures echoes (Zhu & Zhai, 2025) findings that relational support and adaptive strategies can buffer some of the negative identity effects of demanding roles.

Overall, the discussion shows that while policy reforms and systemic conditions create the backdrop for degree-career misalignment, language education teachers actively interpret, respond to, and reshape these conditions through their motivations, strategies, and narratives, in ways that can either mitigate or intensify its impact on their professional identity and practice.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study concludes that pursuing a degree that does not fully align with one's current career path is a deliberate and often strategic choice for language education teachers, rather than simply an error in academic planning. Teachers are primarily motivated by a desire for personal evolution and long-term career versatility: they see graduate study in management and leadership as a long-term investment in their professional identity, future mobility, and perceived credibility in a system where advanced qualifications and merit-based progression are increasingly valued. Intrinsic motivations such as personal growth, intellectual challenge, and self-improvement are reinforced by external expectations from mentors, colleagues, and family, who associate advanced degrees with expertise and upward mobility.

However, the findings also show that when academic trajectories and workplace roles move in different directions, teachers encounter significant professional challenges. Functionally, they experience a theory-practice gap, struggling to connect abstract leadership and management frameworks with the concrete, output-driven demands of language teaching and school operations. Relationally and cognitively, they often feel

stretched between being classroom specialists and emerging leaders, which can lead to role ambiguity, perceived divided attention, and temporary loss of confidence, echoing broader evidence that administrative pressure can weaken teachers' professional identity and well-being. These challenges are intensified by persistent specialization and role mismatches documented in national analyses of the basic education workforce.

In response, teachers do not simply endure this friction; they employ active coping mechanisms and integrative strategies. They engage in intentional knowledge translation, selectively applying leadership concepts to their current roles to improve departmental processes, mentor colleagues, and strengthen language programs. They also bridge skill gaps through self-learning, online resources, and informal mentoring, while adopting deliberate time-management and prioritization practices to balance work and graduate study. This adaptive work is consistent with local evidence that participative leadership is positively associated with language teachers' professional development, suggesting that when given space to exercise leadership, misalignment can contribute to growth rather than purely to strain.

Finally, the study finds that teachers develop strategic, forward-looking advice that can help minimize the negative impact of degree-career misalignment for themselves and others. They emphasize the importance of clarifying personal and professional goals before enrolling in any program, anticipating likely skill gaps early, and seeking targeted professional development such as trainings, certifications, or practical leadership assignments to complement academic learning. Crucially, they underscore the power of constructing a coherent professional narrative that frames their combination of language teaching expertise and leadership preparation as a unique advantage rather than a liability. Within the context of DepEd's evolving career progression system and ongoing efforts to address specialization mismatch, these conclusions point to the need for policies and school-level practices that not only recognize advanced degrees, but also create structured opportunities for teachers to meaningfully integrate their academic preparation with their roles, thereby supporting professional identity, well-being, and educational quality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations drawn from this study aim to translate the findings into actionable steps that address teachers' motivations, the challenges created by degree-career misalignment, and the coping strategies they employ:

1. To increase the study's impact on national policy, the authors propose a differentiated career path policy that rewards advanced pedagogical specialization as equally as administrative leadership.
2. For school heads, the paper's findings suggest a need for internal specialization audits to better utilize the management skills of these teachers within the language department.
3. Furthermore, exploring the role of micro-credentialing as a bridge between management degrees and language classroom needs could provide a practical solution to the functional friction identified in the research.
4. Finally, it is suggested that future research should employ a mixed-methods approach to compare classroom instructional quality scores between teachers whose roles align with their specializations and those who are misaligned, thereby assessing measurable impacts on student learning outcomes.

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