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Original Article

Translating SDG 4 Into Local Practice: A Phenomenological Study of Teacher Agency and the Foundational Skills Gap

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Abstract. This qualitative phenomenological study bridges the gap between United Nations (UN) global policy and rural Philippine classroom realities by exploring how senior high school teachers in Santa Maria, Davao Occidental, integrate Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education) into their practices. Amid a national crisis in foundational skills and poor international assessment rankings, translating the principles of SDG 4 into effective instruction remains a critical challenge. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews (N=10), class observations (N=5), and a focus group discussion (N=5), and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings reveal that teachers internalize SDG 4 as a mandate for Quality, Relevance, and Equity (QRE), driven by a moral commitment to bridge student learning gaps. This commitment manifests in four "Instructional Pillars": Constructivist and Experiential Learning, development of Higher-Order Thinking and Criticality (HOTS), Integrated 21st-Century Skills, and Data-Driven Quality Assurance. However, these efforts are countered by a "Triple Threat" of barriers: the pervasive foundational skills gap, student cognitive resistance, and environmental constraints. While teachers have successfully translated global mandates into rigorous, outcome-driven local practices, these impressive "bottom-up" implementation efforts are constantly undermined by systemic gaps and a lack of specialized training. The study concludes that without addressing structural barriers and student readiness, the long-term sustainability of quality and equity goals remains in jeopardy.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goal 4; Quality education; Outcome-driven pedagogy; Foundational skills gap; Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS); Constructivism; 21st-century skills; Educational equity; Teacher practice; Philippines.*

Quality education (SDG 4) serves as the core of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015). This global mandate has shifted pedagogical approaches worldwide, moving beyond basic content delivery toward fostering foundational competencies—such as global citizenship, critical systems thinking, and socio-emotional learning—necessary to navigate a rapidly changing world (UNESCO, 2017). While nations have universally committed to this transformative agenda at the policy level, the true measure of success lies within the daily practices of the classroom, where teachers serve as the primary architects and agents of mandated change

(Fullan, 2016; Barth & Michelsen, 2019).

In the Philippines, translating these global principles into concrete instruction is hampered by a severe national crisis. The country's participation in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 and 2022 revealed that Filipino students consistently rank among the lowest globally in Mathematics, Reading, and Science, with a vast majority scoring below minimum proficiency levels (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2023). A staggering out-of-school crisis further compounds this systemic failure; nearly 11 million young Filipinos—one in four—are not attending school, highlighting a profound disconnect between SDG 4's aspirations for equity and the reality of the Philippine education system (Desiderio, 2024).

Despite these dual crises of low proficiency and high attrition, a critical research gap exists. The existing literature predominantly focuses on high-level policy or broad curriculum reform (Hefele et al., 2021), leaving the "how" of classroom implementation largely unaddressed. Specifically, empirical data on how teachers in rural, provincial settings—such as Davao Occidental—interpret and translate abstract SDG 4 concepts into concrete pedagogical practices is virtually nonexistent. Without understanding the specific instructional strategies and challenges teachers on the front lines face, the path to educational recovery remains unclear.

Therefore, the primary objective of this qualitative study is to bridge this gap by exploring how senior high school teachers in Santa Maria, Davao Occidental, integrate the foundational ideas of SDG 4 into their classroom practices. By providing empirical insights into effective pedagogical models for sustainability education (Hordern, 2021), this study aims to inform the refinement of national curricula and the design of targeted professional development programs, ultimately strengthening educators' capacity to deliver the transformative education envisioned by the UN.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This specific tradition was selected because the primary goal of the research is to go beyond a simple description of events and instead gain an in-depth understanding of how frontline educators make sense of their lived experiences—specifically the complex process of operationalizing transformative SDG 4 principles within their daily instruction (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). By adopting an IPA framework, the study acknowledges the researcher's role in a double hermeneutic process: the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participants, who are themselves trying to make sense of their pedagogical practices in a challenging educational landscape (Van Manen, 1990). This approach is uniquely suited to capturing the subjective interpretations and personal meanings teachers attach to global mandates in a rural Philippine context.

Research Participants

The study focused on Senior High School (SHS) teachers in Santa Maria, Davao Occidental, Philippines. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria designed to ensure they possessed the depth of experience necessary to reflect on the global-local education gap. To be included, teachers must have: (1) a minimum of five years of active teaching experience to ensure they have navigated the transition to SDG-aligned curricula, (2) a consistent "Very Satisfactory" performance rating, and (3) active involvement in instructional design for core or specialized SHS subjects. While 18 teachers were initially screened, the final sample size was determined by data saturation and the idiographic requirements of IPA. Data collection concluded after 10 in-depth interviews, as the narrative patterns reached a point at which no new codes or conceptual themes emerged. To triangulate these findings, five participants were selected for classroom observations, providing a "real-world" check of their reported practices.

Research Instrument

To capture the depth required for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), semi-structured interview guides were developed and subjected to a multi-stage validation process. First, the instrument underwent content validation by three experts: a Doctor of Education specializing in Curriculum Development, a senior researcher proficient in Qualitative Inquiry, and a Master Teacher with expertise in SDG 4 integration. These experts evaluated the tool based on clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Following integration of expert feedback, the instrument was pilot-tested with two senior high school teachers who were not part of the final study sample. This crucial step allowed the researcher to refine the narrative flow and adjust the phrasing of

questions to ensure they were open-ended and non-leading. For instance, questions were modified to shift from abstract policy jargon to lived-experience prompts, enabling participants to speak freely about their actual classroom struggles. This rigorous refinement process guaranteed that the final interview guide was both sensitive to the local context and capable of eliciting the rich, descriptive data necessary for thematic analysis.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through a multi-method approach designed for triangulation, ensuring the relationship between expressed beliefs and observed practices could be thoroughly analyzed. (a) IDIs were the primary instrument used. Each interview was semi-structured and focused on exploring the teachers' personal understanding of SDG 4 requirements, their motivations for incorporating foundational concepts, and their perceived challenges and successes in integrating these ideas into their curriculum. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. (b) A focused series of five class observations was conducted among a subset of the interviewed teachers. This empirical step directly addressed the identification of instructional strategies by documenting the specific strategies, pedagogical choices, and learning materials teachers deployed in a real-world setting. Observations were recorded using concepts that were aligned with SDG 4. (c) A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with five teachers who had previously participated in the IDIs. The FGD served as a critical step in confirming the data and conducting member checking. The session allowed the researcher to present preliminary findings (emergent themes and instructional strategies) back to the group for validation, clarification, and deeper communal discussion, thereby enhancing the credibility and rigor of the overall analysis.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the IDI transcripts, FGD data, and observation notes was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, adhering to the iterative framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Moving beyond a linear, procedural approach, the analysis was characterized by a reflexive engagement with the data, in which the researcher's role as an "insider" to the Philippine education system was moderated through Bracketing (Epoche). This process of setting aside personal preconceptions and biases about the "foundational skills gap" was essential to ensure the findings authentically represented the participants' lived voices rather than the researcher's professional assumptions.

The analytical journey progressed from Initial Coding (labeling discrete segments of text) to Candidate Themes. Data were processed manually using a Color-Coding system, where specific colors were assigned to recurring pedagogical strategies and structural barriers. This "physical" engagement with the data enabled a granular comparison between teachers' stated beliefs in interviews and their actual actions in observation logs. These codes were then clustered into sub-themes and ultimately synthesized into the Global Themes—categorized as "Instructional Pillars" and "Triple Threat" barriers—to provide a comprehensive answer to the study's objective regarding the synergy between global policy and local practice.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered rigorously to all ethical protocols, beginning with obtaining institutional approval from the School Head prior to data collection. Participant rights and privacy were paramount; individuals received comprehensive information about the study's goals and procedures, along with assurance of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. To ensure anonymity, all data were secured and managed using coded identifiers.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' Perception of Translating SDG 4 Into Classroom Reality

Conceptualization of SDG 4: Beyond Access to Operational Quality

Teachers' definitions of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) demonstrate a clear understanding of the global shift in educational focus. Their conceptualization moves decisively beyond mere access (enrollment rates) toward Target 4.7, which emphasizes relevant learning outcomes and operational quality. The immediate recall of foundational concepts centered on 21st-Century Skills (ICT application, collaboration, and problem-solving) confirms that the teachers prioritize competencies highly demanded in the modern economy. This alignment is encapsulated in their definition:

"SDG 4 means producing well-rounded and globally competitive graduates who possess critical thinking skills and are equipped with skills in a real-life setting across various areas like TVL, business,..."

Crucially, the perception of the teacher as the primary agent of implementation underscores a systemic belief that effective change hinges on the individual educator's commitment and alignment with the goal. This viewpoint places significant responsibility on the teacher, suggesting that the success of SDG 4 is viewed as a critical bottom-up endeavor, as expressed by one participant:

"*I believe that as the frontliners, agents, and managers of learning, we are fundamentally responsible for the realization of our educational goals. If we, as teachers, are unaware of or unanchored to those goals, I believe the pursuit of quality education 'will not come to reality,' and educational problems will inevitably recur.*"

This perspective aligns with Akter's (2025) idea, which places the burden of successful SDG 4 realization directly on the "frontliner," implying that the goal will fail if the educator is "unanchored."

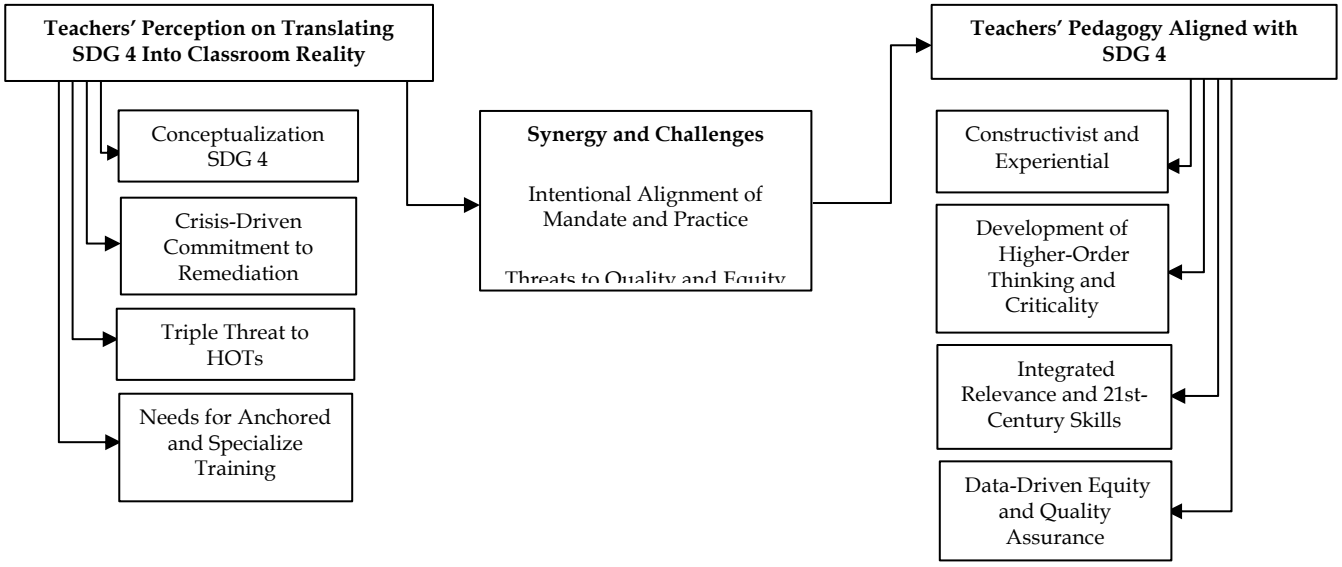

Figure 1. *Teachers' Perception, Synergy, and Alignment of Pedagogy with SDG 4*

Crisis-Driven Commitment to Remediation

The findings revealed that the primary internal driver compelling teachers to incorporate SDG 4 concepts is a profound moral and ethical obligation to address a critical local educational crisis: the pervasive foundational skills gap (poor literacy and numeracy) persisting even at the Senior High School (SHS) level. As one participant articulated:

"*I am primarily motivated by the critical issue of poor literacy and numeracy skills persisting among our Senior High School (SHS) students.*"

This motivation, categorized as crisis and remediation, is significant because, while it is extrinsic to the general UN mandate, it is deeply intrinsic to the teacher's professional responsibility and sense of duty. The urgent desire to address poor basic skills and prevent future poverty highlights a strong belief in education as a powerful tool for socioeconomic mobility (Fiveable Content Team, 2025), directly reflecting the core principle of SDG 4. Instead of being motivated purely by theoretical constructs or external mandates, teachers are driven by the alarming reality of their students' lack of readiness, which forces them to constantly challenge and Upgrade Practice. This intense personal commitment is evident in the participants' statements:

"*I recognize the urgent need to intervene and feel personally responsible, believing that 'this has to stop, I need to help' prevent students from graduating without the necessary foundational skills.*"

The Triple Threat to Higher-Order Thinking

The push to integrate the high-level objectives of SDG 4, such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Target 4.7), is severely undermined by a "Triple Threat" of interconnected student-level and environmental barriers. These three significant challenges collectively impede the realization of quality education. The first threat is the pervasive Foundational Skills Gap, which underscores the difficulty of implementing Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) when students lack proficiency in Lower-Order Thinking Skills (LOTS). Specifically, teachers cannot effectively engage students in the complex analysis and justification required by Target 4.7 when basic reading comprehension or computation skills are deficient, forcing a constant, detrimental trade-off between curriculum pacing and necessary remediation. One teacher expressed this fundamental obstacle:

"*I'd say the most significant barrier I face is the low reading comprehension and poor mastery of basic fundamental operations (numeracy) among my students. This constantly forces me to slow down the flow of the lessons and go back to basic comprehension, which makes completing advanced tasks much harder.*"

Compounding this challenge is the student cognitive resistance, which represents a profound disengagement with the learning process itself. Students' increasing reliance on plagiarism, AI, and surface-level copying bypasses the essential "cognitive struggle" needed for critical thinking and long-term knowledge retention. This practice directly negates the quality aspect of SDG 4 by turning high-level assignments into mere acts of automation or academic dishonesty. This internal barrier, rooted in student attitude and effort, was clearly articulated:

"*The students' attitude is a huge internal barrier: they exhibit negative thinking, saying 'Ma'am, lisod man ni' (Ma'am, this is difficult), and they lack value for education. They resort to dishonest work like copying and using AI, and this is highly problematic because it bypasses the necessary cognitive struggle or processing required for critical thinking and long-term retention.*"

Finally, these internal issues are exacerbated by environmental and systemic constraints. Challenges like classroom overpopulation, persistent lack of resources (such as functional ICT and science laboratories), and the difficulty of managing emotionally disturbed or vulnerable students collectively prevent the provision of the safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment required by SDG 4 (Target 4.a). A participant highlighted the systemic strain on resources and teacher capacity:

"*I find that the overpopulation in the classroom really exacerbates our challenges. It leads directly to a shortage of resources like ICT and science laboratories, contributes to low attendance, and makes it extremely difficult to manage emotionally disturbed students, especially working students and those with difficulty accessing ICT.*"

Need for Anchored and Specialized Training

Despite their professional dedication and internal motivation, teachers reported a significant gap between their efforts and the systemic support they receive, resulting in an overwhelming demand for Practical and Specialized Training. While teachers are conceptually motivated by the Quality, Relevance, and Equity (QRE) framework of SDG 4, they identified a critical Lack of Specific SDG 4 Knowledge. This suggests that past professional development (PD) may have focused on general pedagogy without explicitly anchoring those practices to the global goal. One participant admitted to this knowledge gap:

"*I have to admit that we have a very poor understanding of the specifics of SDG 4. There is a clear need for comprehensive training so we can anchor our lessons effectively to the UN goal.*"

This need for practical skills extends to core pedagogical challenges. Teachers require updated training on pedagogy and classroom management to effectively cater to the diverse and high number of students they encounter daily, especially in the areas of technology integration and behavioral management:

"*I feel we really need updated training on pedagogy and classroom management so we can effectively cater to the diverse and high number of students we encounter daily. Specifically, we need better training in ICT use and managing student focus and retention.*"

Most critically, the urgent demand for inclusive education training (to handle neurodiverse and vulnerable

students) highlights the reality that inclusive classrooms are managed by underprepared staff. This situation confirms that for SDG 4 to meet its mandate for equity and inclusion (Target 4.5), PD must shift from theoretical updates to practical, specialized skills in differentiated instruction:

"*There is an acute need for specialized training in handling neuro-diverse students and those in vulnerable situations, especially since most of us are Non-SNED teachers (teachers without Special Needs Education specialization) handling these diverse classrooms.*"

These perspectives regarding inclusive education, specifically the need for PD to increase teacher awareness on how to incorporate children with impairments into conventional classrooms effectively, are aligned with the study of Jardinez and Natividad (2024), which discussed that a foundational lack of specialized training is a major threat to the teacher's capacity to deliver quality, inclusive education.

Teachers' Pedagogy Aligned with SDG 4

Constructivist and Experiential Learning

During the class observations, constructivist and experiential learning are prevalent in most teaching strategies used by the participants. This is evidenced by the consistent application of a Do-Reflect-Conceptualize cycle in instruction, characterized by the Activity-Analysis-Abstraction sequence. Significant practices observed during the observation include the Anticipation Reaction Guide (ARG) to activate prior knowledge and experiential activities such as the "*Spot the Difference*" *Game* and "*ACT IT OUT*" role-playing. These indicate that students are consistently positioned as active agents in constructing their own knowledge. This pedagogical approach aligns closely with Kolb's experiential learning, in which deep, lasting learning results from inquiry, activity, and social interaction before formal conceptualization, thereby enhancing engagement and conceptual retention compared to purely didactic methods (McLeod, 2025).

Further, the strategies used by the participants are supported by several studies, like the Anticipation-Reaction Guide (ARG), considered as a highly effective instructional tool for improving reading comprehension, particularly for students struggling with narrative texts (Sari, L, & Faridi, 2020) and hands-on activities (games and role-playing) have been shown to improve student performance in specific courses and support overall educational development (Scott et al., 2023).

Development of Higher-Order Thinking and Criticality

Development of higher-order thinking and criticality demonstrates an intentional curriculum structure designed to elevate student cognition beyond memorization. This is substantiated by learning objectives that explicitly require students to *Identify, Expound, and Justify*, placing demands on the analysis and evaluation levels of cognitive processing. High-impact scenarios, such as the *Crash Landing Scenario*, require analysis and justification, and a *Policy Analysis Assignment* focused on reducing inequality, ground abstract concepts in social relevance (SDG 4.7).

Further, participants observed used guide questions to drive analysis, reflecting a strategic pedagogical choice aimed at cultivating critical evaluation and problem-solving abilities. This instructional strategy aligns with the findings of Irwanto, Suryani, and Cahyani (2024), who found that supplementing guided inquiry with problem-solving tasks effectively prompts students to deconstruct information. Ultimately, this process facilitates reasoned judgment and yields a statistically significant enhancement in students' higher-order thinking capabilities.

Integrated Relevance and 21st-Century Skills

Integrated Relevance and 21st-Century Skills highlights the curriculum's commitment to bridging the gap between classroom learning and modern life, fulfilling the mandate of SDG Target 4.4. Instruction consistently grounds content in real-world applications (e.g., the Crash Landing Scenario), technology (e.g., Multimedia Production/Planning using ICT tools such as Canva and video editors), and specific cultural contexts (e.g., Role-playing and Travelogue focusing on the local Philippine context and social sectors). The pervasive use of Collaborative Group Work, which is formally assessed on teamwork and cooperation, ensures that students develop crucial employability skills, including communication, collaboration, and digital literacy. This integration of skills and context makes education highly relevant, thereby preparing students directly for future careers and meaningful societal participation (Phinla, Phinla, & Mahapoonyanont, 2025).

Data-Driven Equity and Quality Assurance

Data-Driven Equity and Quality Assurance underpins the instruction's adherence to the "inclusive and equitable" principles of SDG 4. The teacher utilizes systematic mechanisms to monitor and respond to learning outcomes. This is most evident in the mandatory reflection log used to track learners who achieve below 80% and plan targeted remediation, as well as in the immediate feedback provided by Formative Checks. The systematic tracking of learners who perform below an 80% threshold aligns with the principles of Mastery Learning, which advocates targeted remediation to ensure that all students reach proficiency (Guskey, 2015).

The adoption of Process-Oriented Rubrics for activities such as role-playing and multimedia planning shifts the assessment focus from the final product to the demonstration of skill acquisition during the process. These practices create a continuous feedback loop and accountability system that ensures high-quality instruction and proactively prevents learning gaps from becoming permanent inequities (Annandale et al., 2021).

Synergy and Challenges

The analysis of the interview data (Teacher Beliefs/Mandates) and the class observation data (Observed Practices) reveals a strong, intentional synergy between the teachers' conceptual understanding of SDG 4 and their pedagogical execution. However, this synergy is constantly threatened by severe, acknowledged systemic and student-level challenges that jeopardize the quality and equity goals.

Intentional Alignment of Mandate and Practice

The analysis of the interview and class observation data reveals a strong conceptual and operational synergy between the teachers' mandates regarding Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 and their classroom practices. Teachers' conceptualization of SDG 4 as a directive for Quality, Relevance, and Equity (QRE) (3.1.1) is robustly operationalized through an Outcome-Driven Pedagogy and adherence to Data-Driven Equity (3.2; 3.3.4), confirming that the theoretical mandate for moving beyond mere educational access to focusing on high-quality outcomes is successfully translated into instructional design. This commitment is particularly evident in the prioritized development of 21st-Century Skills (3.1.1), which are explicitly executed and assessed via Integrated Relevance and 21st-Century Skills (3.2.3) activities, such as collaborative group work and multimedia production, directly fulfilling the skill-focused requirements of SDG Target 4.4.

Furthermore, the internal drive articulated by teachers to challenge and improve practice due to a crisis-driven commitment (3.1.2) is clearly reflected in the consistent application of Constructivist and Experiential Learning (3.2.1), using the Do-Reflect-Conceptualize sequence, which aligns practice with modern, active learning theories (Dewey/Vygotsky). Most critically, the fundamental need for Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) is addressed through the intentional Development of Higher-Order Thinking and Criticality (3.2.2). This is substantiated by learning objectives that compel students to Expound and Justify, and by high-impact scenarios such as the Crash Landing Scenario and Policy Analysis, which elevate student cognition to the Analyze and Evaluate levels of processing, thus satisfying the mandate for critical thinking and cognitive rigor embedded in the concept of quality education.

Challenges: Threats to Quality and Equity

Despite the strong intentional synergy between the teachers' mandates and observed pedagogical design, the realization of SDG 4 is severely threatened by significant barriers identified in the interview data. The most pervasive challenge is the Foundational Skills Gap (3.1.2, 3.1.3), where poor literacy and numeracy persist at the Senior High School (SHS) level. This deficit directly undermines the Development of Higher-Order Thinking and Criticality (3.2.2), as teachers are compelled to slow down the curriculum to provide foundational remediation, rendering high-level tasks such as policy analysis and justification ineffective. This structural gap ultimately undermines the quality aspect (HOTS) of SDG 4, often resulting in superficial learning experiences.

Compounding this is the issue of Student Cognitive Resistance (3.1.3), characterized by plagiarism, reliance on AI, and general disengagement from the necessary intellectual struggle. This resistance directly bypasses the core purpose of Constructivist and Experiential Learning (3.2.1) (Do-Reflect-Conceptualize), thereby undermining relevance and quality by substituting critical thinking with automation or academic dishonesty. Furthermore, Environmental and Systemic Constraints (3.1.3), such as classroom overpopulation and the lack of essential resources, including functional ICT laboratories, limit the implementation of Integrated Relevance and 21st-Century Skills (3.2.3), potentially constraining and inequitably distributing the observed efforts in Multimedia

Production and Collaborative Group Work.

Finally, the teachers admitted the need for specialized training (3.1.4), particularly regarding Inclusive Education for neurodiverse students (Target 4.5), which jeopardizes the commitment to Data-Driven Equity and Quality Assurance (3.3.4). While teachers track learners below 80% and plan remediation, the lack of specific expertise among non-Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers means that the proactive support intended to prevent learning gaps from becoming permanent inequities may be unsustainable or ineffective, directly challenging the equity principle embedded in SDG 4.

Conclusion

This study concludes that while Senior High School teachers in Santa Maria, Davao Occidental, have successfully transitioned from traditional "banking" models to sophisticated constructivist frameworks, their professional agency remains fundamentally paradoxical and fragile. Although educators demonstrate a strong commitment by applying Cognitive Load Theory and Experiential Learning to bridge the gap between global SDG 4 mandates and local realities, their efforts serve as a "heroic stop-gap" rather than a sustainable, systemic model. The identified "Triple Threat"—the foundational skills gap, student cognitive resistance, and systemic neglect—creates a structural ceiling that renders higher-order thinking (HOTS) an aspirational facade. Consequently, the realization of global quality and equity goals is jeopardized by reliance on individual teacher morality rather than on robust systemic foundations.

While the study is limited by its small, idiographic sample of ten rural teachers and a specific snapshot in time, it offers a clear path toward "Sustainable Implementation." Achieving this requires the Department of Education to realign policies by addressing the "mass promotion" culture and institutionalizing remediation windows and resource decentralization. Furthermore, school administrators must pivot professional development toward specialized inclusive education and psychosocial support to combat teacher burnout. Ultimately, future research must investigate the roots of student cognitive resistance and the long-term career impacts of current instructional pillars to ensure that the burden of global educational mandates no longer rests solely on frontline educators' shoulders.

Contributions of Authors

The authors certify that they independently conceived, designed, executed, and wrote the study.

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The authors state that no external financial support was received for this study.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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