Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion Journal
https://pasrjournal.org | eISSN: 2362-9320
Volume 6 Issue No. 1 | doi: https://doi.org/10.63931/pasrj.v6i1.81
Received: May 7, 2026 | Revised: May 18, 2026 | Accepted: May 19, 2026 | Published Online: May 20, 2026

Article

Novice Teachers as Emerging Voices: Classroom Practices and Learner Engagement Strategies in the Educational Recovery

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Abstract

Educational recovery following large-scale disruption, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, required teachers to address challenges that extend beyond academic instruction, situated within social science and sociological perspectives on education and values. This qualitative descriptive study examined how novice teachers navigated classroom realities during this recovery period, emphasizing their lived experiences and guided by philosophical inquiry into values, spirituality, and professional growth, with particular attention to classroom management, learner engagement, instructional adjustment, and professional support. Guided by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, the study involved six novice teachers from public and private schools in the Philippines with three to five years of teaching experience. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed thematically. The findings identified three interconnected areas of experience that resonate with religious education and sociology of religion: learner struggles with motivation and attention, teachers' adaptive practices integrating emotional and spiritual dimensions, and peer collaboration as a resilient support system. Overall, the study presents novice teachers as educators who develop professional knowledge through lived experiences rather than deficiency, offering sociological and spiritual insights to strengthen school leadership, shape recovery-responsive policies, and design teacher education programs that emphasize values, reflection, and experiential learning.

Keywords: *Educational recovery, Lived experiences, Novice teachers, Sociology of religion, Values education*

Suggested citation:
Latayan, A.M. & San Sebastian, R. (2026). Novice Teachers as Emerging Voices: Classroom Practices and Learner Engagement Strategies in the Educational Recovery. *Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion Journal, 6*(1), 40-53. https://doi.org/10.63931/pasrj.v6i1.81

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Introduction

When education experiences major disruptions, such as the COVID 19 pandemic, schools do not simply return to their previous ways of teaching once classes resume. Instead, they enter a period of educational recovery that brings new and continuing challenges. During this recovery period, teaching goes beyond completing lessons or covering the curriculum and includes rebuilding classroom routines, re-engaging learners and restoring the social behaviors necessary for effective classroom interaction. Studies have shown that learners returning to face-to-face instruction often struggle with attention, motivation, and adjustment to structured learning environments after prolonged periods of remote or flexible learning (Bagarra et al., 2024; Bantugan et al., 2025; Macias, 2024).

These conditions place new demands on teachers, particularly in managing classroom behavior and sustaining learner engagement. Learners in the recovery period have also shown increased emotional sensitivity, anxiety, and disengagement, which further complicates the teaching and learning process (Department of Health [DOH], 2020; Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021). As a result, effective teaching in the recovery era requires instructional flexibility, emotional responsiveness, and sensitivity to the realities of learners' lived experiences.

Within this context, novice teachers occupy a unique position. Novice teachers, generally defined as educators with three to five years of teaching experience, entered the profession during or shortly after large-scale educational disruption (Sözen, 2018; Shank, 2023). Unlike experienced teachers who had established teaching routines prior to the disruption, novice teachers began teaching without stable classroom habits to rely on. Consequently, they were compelled to learn how to teach while actively teaching, relying on trial and error, reflection, and continuous adaptation. Research suggests that this process of learning through experience plays a critical role in shaping novice teachers' professional development, particularly in challenging and uncertain contexts (Camburn & Han, 2015; Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020).

Despite the growing body of literature on educational recovery, many studies continue to portray novice teachers mainly in terms of difficulty, stress, and risk of attrition (Baker et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022). While these challenges are real, such framing often overlooks what novice teachers contribute to understanding teaching during recovery. Few studies examine how novice teachers' daily classroom experiences inform new approaches to classroom management, learner engagement, and instructional adaptation, particularly within the Philippine context (Iballa, 2021). This gap limits our understanding of how teaching practices evolve in response to recovery era conditions.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of novice teachers during the educational recovery period. Guided by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, the study recognizes novice teachers as emerging voices whose professional knowledge develops through concrete classroom experiences, reflective observation, conceptual understanding, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975). By examining how novice teachers manage classrooms, engage learners, and adapt their instructional strategies in response to recovery era challenges, this study contributes insight into teaching practices that are responsive to disruption, uncertainty, and change. This study also situates novice teachers' experiences within broader sociological and philosophical inquiries, recognizing their lived realities as contributions to values education, spirituality, and the sociology of religion in the Philippine recovery context.

Methodology

This study used Creswell's qualitative descriptive research design, which is appropriate for studies that aim to carefully describe participants' experiences as they naturally occur in real world settings. Qualitative descriptive design captures lived experiences and focuses on presenting a clear and detailed account of a phenomenon rather than developing abstract theories or making causal explanations. As explained by Ayton (2023), this approach is most suitable when the goal is to describe what is happening, how it is experienced, and how participants understand their situation.

Research Design

In line with Creswell's framework, this design allowed the researcher to capture novice teachers' firsthand experiences of classroom management, learner engagement, and instructional adjustments during the educational recovery period. The intent of the study was not to test hypotheses or explain why certain behaviors occurred, but to provide a faithful description of how novice teachers experienced and navigated recovery era realities (Creswell, 2013).

Compared to experimental or explanatory qualitative approaches, qualitative descriptive research places strong emphasis on participants' own words, perspectives, and meanings while still allowing the researcher to organize, interpret, and present patterns across experiences (Ayton, 2023; Regoniel, 2023). This made the approach particularly suitable for examining how novice teachers made sense of their evolving professional practice during recovery, as it allowed their voices to remain central while

producing practice-based insights relevant to schools, leaders, and teacher education programs.

Participants

The participants consisted of six novice teachers from public and private schools in the Philippines. For the purposes of this study, novice teachers were defined as educators with three to five years of teaching experience, consistent with definitions used in previous research on early-career teachers (Sözen, 2018; Shank, 2023). All participants had taught during periods of instructional disruption and were actively teaching during the recovery phase of sustained face-to-face instruction.

This group was purposively selected because novice teachers began their professional practice under conditions of uncertainty, limited classroom stability, and rapid instructional change. Prior research suggests that teachers in the early stages of their careers are particularly shaped by contextual demands and experiential learning processes, making them a distinct cohort for examining recovery era teaching (Dvir & Schatz Oppenheimer, 2020; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023).

Data Collection

Data were collected using two qualitative methods, namely semi structured individual interviews and a focused group discussion (FGD).

Semi structured interviews were used to allow participants to describe their classroom experiences in depth while maintaining alignment with the study's focus on classroom management, learner engagement strategies, and institutional support during recovery. This format enabled the researcher to ask guiding questions while also allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered most significant (Creswell, 2013).

The focused group discussion was conducted to deepen analysis, surface shared experiences, and validate emerging patterns across participants. FGDs are particularly effective in qualitative research for examining commonalities and contrasts in participants' experiences, and for supporting analytic triangulation (Regoniel, 2023).

All interviews and the FGD were conducted online, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, all interview and focused group discussion recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using Creswell's Data

Analysis Spiral, which involves an iterative and cyclical process of organizing, reading, coding, and interpreting qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). This approach is consistent with qualitative descriptive research, where the primary aim is to produce a clear and faithful description of participants' experiences rather than to generate theory or establish causal explanations.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data and to identify meaningful segments related to classroom management, learner engagement, instructional adaptation, and professional support during the educational recovery period. Initial notes and descriptive codes were generated based on participants' words and expressions. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories, which were refined through comparison across participants. These categories were further organized into themes that reflected shared patterns in novice teachers' experiences.

Throughout the analytic process, attention was given to preserving participants' meanings while identifying connections across accounts. Consistent with Creswell's qualitative descriptive approach, the goal of the analysis was to present an organized and coherent account of what novice teachers experienced and how they navigated recovery era classroom realities. Interpretation and connections to existing literature were reserved for the discussion section.

Ethical Approval

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from an Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC). Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were handled with confidentiality in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative findings, following established qualitative research standards (Creswell, 2013).

First, method triangulation was achieved using individual interviews and a focused group discussion, allowing patterns and themes to be examined across multiple data sources. Second, member checking and another round of focused group discussion were conducted by presenting emerging themes to participants for validation, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences.

Third, peer debriefing was used during the data analysis process to critically examine coding decisions and thematic interpretations.

Together, these strategies enhanced credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings and strengthened the overall integrity of the analytic process (Creswell, 2013; Regoniel, 2023).

Results

This section presents the findings derived from the qualitative analysis of semi structured individual interviews and a focused group discussion with six novice teachers. Following Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral, the analytic process involved iterative cycles of transcription, close reading, descriptive coding, categorization, and thematic synthesis. The primary aim of the analysis was to provide a clear and faithful description of novice teachers' experiences during the educational recovery period, particularly in relation to classroom management, learner engagement, instructional adaptation, and professional support. To ensure transparency and analytic rigor, this section begins with two visual aids that document how the findings were developed.

Table 1. Codebook Excerpt. This illustrates how initial descriptive codes were defined, applied, and anchored in participants' verbatim statements.

Code	Definition	Inclusion/ Exclusion	Exemplar Quote	Participant
short attention span	Learners sustain focus for only brief periods during class activities.	Include: distraction, instant gratification; Exclude: absences due to illness	"Their attention span is limited… they try to do it instantly."	B
phone distraction	Use of phones/gadgets interfering with lesson engagement.	Include: off-task phone use; Exclude: planned teacher-led device use	"Inattentive… they just wanted to use their phones."	E
back-to-basics	Return to foundational skills (penmanship, grammar) even in senior levels.	Include: explicit re-teaching of basics; Exclude: enrichment tasks	"We don't have a choice but to teach back to basics."	E

responsive differentiation	Tiered/scaffolded tasks based on readiness or proficiency.	Include: simplified instructions, visual exemplars; Exclude: uniform tasks	"Post examples… step by step; recorded versions."	B
hybrid fluency	Strategic blending of digital tools to sustain attention in F2F classes.	Include: Canva, Wordwall, Kahoot; Exclude: incidental tool use	"One of the life-savers now is Canva."	A
support ecosystem	Formal/informal mentoring, LAC sessions, collegial sharing.	Include: peer tutoring, mentoring; Exclude: isolated self-study	"Work becomes lighter… strong support system."	B

Table 2. From Raw Data to Themes using Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral (illustrative pathway). This traces the progression from raw interview data to codes, categories, and the final thematic structure.

Stage / Step	Description / Analytic Action
Raw Data	Interview transcripts (semi-structured individual interviews); Focus Group Discussion transcripts; memos/notes
Organize Data	Compile and organize transcripts; prepare verbatim transcripts for analysis and coding
Read thoroughly & make notes	Close reading of transcripts; memo writing / initial analytic notes before coding
Level 1: Codes (Descriptive Coding)	short attention span; phone distraction; back-to-basics; responsive differentiation; hybrid fluency; support ecosystem
Level 2: Categories	Behavioral issues (short attention span, phone distraction); Scaffolding needs (back-to-basics, responsive differentiation); Support structures (hybrid fluency, support ecosystem)
Level 3: Themes	1) The Post-Pandemic Classroom Landscape; 2) Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies in the Recovery Era; 3) The Novice Teacher Support Ecosystem
Analytic flow (Spiral summary)	Close reading → memo writing → descriptive coding → category building → thematic synthesis (Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral)

Following Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral, the interview and FGD transcripts were subjected to repeated close reading and memo writing, followed by descriptive coding. Codes were clustered into broader categories and synthesized into three major themes: (1) the post-pandemic classroom landscape, (2) adaptive pedagogical strategies in the recovery era, and (3) the novice teacher support ecosystem. Together, these tables demonstrate the systematic movement from participants' narratives to the three major themes presented in this section.

Analysis of the interview and focus group discussion data revealed three major themes that describe novice teachers' experiences during the educational recovery period. These themes reflect changes in classroom conditions, instructional responses, and professional support structures that shaped novice teachers' practice.

The Recovery Era Classroom Landscape

Participants described classrooms marked by shortened attention spans, increased dependence on digital devices, reduced learner motivation, weakened discipline, and heightened social anxiety. These observations are consistent with studies reporting post disruption learner disengagement, behavioral regression, and difficulty readjusting to structured learning environments (Bagarra et al., 2024; Bantugan et al., 2025; Macias, 2024).

Although students were physically present in class, many appeared mentally disengaged, requiring teachers to reestablish routines, expectations, and classroom norms. These findings align with research suggesting that learning recovery involves not only academic remediation but also the rebuilding of learners' self-regulation and social participation skills (Reupert et al., 2022; Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021).

Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies in the Recovery Era

In response to these classroom realities, novice teachers adopted flexible and responsive instructional strategies. Participants reported using responsive differentiation by simplifying instructions, chunking tasks, and adjusting pacing to accommodate varied learner readiness. While simplification was frequently mentioned, it functioned as a scaffold rather than a reduction of academic rigor, supporting learners' gradual reentry into complex learning tasks. Similar findings have been noted in studies on novice teachers' adaptive strategies in disrupted learning contexts (Shank, 2023; Flores et al., 2024).

Teachers also described a renewed focus on foundational skills, even at higher grade levels, reflecting documented learning gaps following extended periods of flexible learning (Fong, 2022; Kerres & Buchner, 2022). In addition, participants demonstrated hybrid fluency by integrating visual and accessible digital tools to support engagement and clarity. This echoes research showing that novice teachers' digital competence became a key instructional asset during recovery (Brianza et al., 2023; Dimaculangan et al., 2022).

Socio-emotional-centered teaching also emerged as a consistent practice, with teachers prioritizing encouragement, emotional safety, and values integration. This approach helps learners practice self-regulation and empathy, giving them the tools to apply their core values with integrity. It also fosters spirituality by transforming their behavior into a deeper sense of connection to their world. These approaches correspond with studies emphasizing the importance of social and emotional learning in post disruption classrooms (Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021; Zhai & Du, 2020).

The Novice Teacher Support Ecosystem

Participants emphasized peer collaboration, mentoring, and collegial support as essential to sustaining their teaching practice. Learning Action Cell sessions and informal exchanges with colleagues were identified as primary sources of guidance and professional reassurance. Similar patterns have been observed in research highlighting the role of peer networks in novice teacher development, particularly in times of uncertainty (Camburn & Han, 2015; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023).

At the same time, participants identified ongoing constraints, including inconsistent policy implementation, excessive non-teaching workloads, and limited access to instructional resources. These challenges are consistent with literature documenting structural pressures that contribute to novice teacher stress and burnout (Baker et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022). Despite these constraints, novice teachers described developing resilience and adaptability through experience

Discussion

The findings indicate that novice teachers are not merely recipients of institutional support but active agents in the educational recovery process. Their experiences align with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through cycles of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975).

Classroom recovery emerged as a process requiring the restoration of structure alongside attention to learners' emotional needs. Novice teachers navigated tensions between authority and care, demonstrating that classroom management during recovery is relational rather than purely procedural. This supports prior research suggesting that effective post disruption teaching depends on balancing discipline with emotional responsiveness (Macias, 2024; Reupert et al., 2022).

The findings also highlight a shift in the role of technology. Rather than functioning as a temporary substitute, digital tools became integrated instructional supports that enhanced engagement and clarity when used strategically. This reflects broader research indicating that novice teachers' digital fluency contributed to instructional adaptability during and after periods of disruption (Brianza et al., 2023; Flores et al., 2024).

Peer-based support systems played a critical role in novice teachers' professional growth. In contexts where formal guidance was limited, collaboration

with colleagues functioned as an experiential learning space that supported reflection and experimentation. In Sociology and Religion, peer collaboration fosters natural solidarity and social cohesion by creating shared collective interaction. This collaborative practice acts as a democratic laboratory where diverse perspectives of learners arise, helping them understand and find mutual belonging. This finding reinforces existing literature on the importance of collegial learning environments for novice teachers' development (Camburn & Han, 2015; Iballa, 2021).

Overall, the findings challenge deficit-oriented portrayals of novice teachers as primarily underprepared or overwhelmed. Instead, novice teachers are shown to possess adaptive strengths shaped by recovery-era teaching, including instructional flexibility, openness to learning, and responsiveness to learners' needs. However, the sustainability of these strengths depends on consistent leadership support, manageable workloads, and adequate resources (Marshall et al., 2022).

The findings indicate that the novice teachers' emerging voice is defined by a set of distinct and contextually shaped professional qualities. Participants consistently demonstrated resilience, emotional sensitivity, and patience in responding to learners who were experiencing stress, disengagement, or mental health concerns during the recovery period. Rather than reacting with frustration, novice teachers described being approachable, calm, and emotionally attentive, particularly toward students who struggled to readjust to structured classroom routines. This emotional availability reflects a form of professional responsiveness shaped by teaching in a period marked by heightened learner vulnerability.

In addition, novice teachers displayed notable flexibility and creativity in their use of digital tools for instruction. Participants described confidence in experimenting with technology, adapting online platforms for face-to-face teaching, and integrating digital resources to support engagement and understanding. This adaptability appears to be linked to their familiarity with technology and social media, having grown up and entered the profession in a digitally saturated environment. Together, these qualities suggest that novice teachers' emerging voice is not rooted in traditional authority or experience alone, but in their capacity to respond empathetically and creatively to the demands of recovery-era classrooms.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that novice teachers play a vital role in educational recovery through instructional adaptability, emotional responsiveness, and collaborative engagement, reflecting sociological insights into how social science perspectives frame resilience and transformation in education with learners and colleagues. Their experiences show that teaching during recovery is not a simple return to established routines, but a dynamic and evolving practice shaped by uncertainty, adjustment, and continuous reflection, underscoring the significance of lived experiences and philosophical inquiry in shaping professional identity. In navigating classrooms marked by learner disengagement, emotional vulnerability,

and shifting instructional demands, novice teachers developed practices that respond to both academic and human needs, resonating with religious education's emphasis on holistic formation and values integration.

Taken together, the findings position novice teachers as emerging voices whose professional identity is distinct and contextually shaped, reflecting sociological and theological-spiritual dimensions of resilience, compassion, and relational teaching. Their resilience is reflected not in mastery gained through long experience, but in their capacity to learn through practice, reflect on challenges, and adapt in real time. Their compassion, patience, and approachability toward learners, particularly those experiencing emotional or mental health difficulties, highlight a form of relational teaching that became essential during the recovery period. At the same time, their flexibility and creativity in using digital tools reveal strengths linked to their familiarity with technology and their willingness to experiment with new instructional approaches.

Rather than viewing novice teachers as lacking experience, this study highlights how their entry into the profession during a period of disruption enabled them to develop distinctive practices that address complex realities, contributing to social science discourse and values education in recovery contexts. Their emerging voice reflects a generation of educators whose professional growth is grounded in experiential learning, empathy, and adaptability. Recognizing and supporting these qualities is essential for sustaining educational recovery and for preparing schools and teacher education programs to respond effectively to future disruptions, guided by philosophical inquiry and socio-religious perspectives on resilience, values, and spirituality.

Implications

Implications for School Leadership

School leaders should recognize recovery-era teaching as complex relational work, not just procedural management. From a sociological and lived experiences perspective, novice teachers' adaptability reflects how professional identity is shaped by disruption and recovery. Reducing administrative burdens, protecting planning time, and strengthening mentoring structures can sustain teachers' resilience and values formation. Leadership that integrates spirituality and relational teaching acknowledges the emotional and moral dimensions of classroom recovery, ensuring that novice teachers' lived experiences are valued as part of institutional growth (Macias, 2024; Marshall et al., 2022).

Implications for Policy Development

Educational policies should be recovery responsive and flexible, allowing teachers to adapt instructional pacing, assessment, and classroom management to learners' readiness. From a social science and sociology of religion lens, consistency in policy implementation and equitable access to resources are essential to prevent

burnout and sustain communal resilience. Policies must also embed values education and spirituality to ensure that recovery is not only technical but also moral and holistic. This aligns with philosophical inquiries into justice and equity, positioning policy as a framework for sustaining academic and human development (Baker et al., 2021; Pereira et al., 2025).

Implications for Teacher Education

Teacher education programs should embed experiential learning, instructional agility, and crisis-responsive pedagogy into pre-service and in-service training. From a religious education and theological-spiritual perspective, preparing teachers to learn through uncertainty and adapt to changing classroom conditions is essential for future disruption readiness. Novice teachers' lived experiences demonstrate that professional growth is not only technical but also existential, requiring reflection, values integration, and philosophical inquiry into the meaning of teaching. Embedding these dimensions ensures that teacher education cultivates resilience, empathy, and adaptability as enduring professional qualities (Kolb, 1984; Morris, 2020).

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