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Rebuilding Academic Confidence After Prolonged Learning Loss: A Grounded Theory of Learners' Self-Belief Recovery

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to develop a grounded theory explaining how secondary school learners rebuild academic confidence following prolonged learning loss caused by educational disruptions. Using an interpretivist-constructivist Straussian grounded theory design, the study examined the experiences of 18 junior and senior high school learners at Toledo National Vocational School, Toledo City, Cebu, Philippines. Participants were selected purposively and through theoretical sampling; data were gathered through validated semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding with constant comparison. Findings identified five interrelated categories: academic fragmentation, disrupted academic identity, adaptive recovery processes, support–barrier dynamics, and reconstructed academic confidence. Learners described confusion, learning gaps, emotional distress, self-doubt, and reduced participation, followed by gradual confidence rebuilding through lesson review, repeated practice, help-seeking, self-regulation, and support from teachers, peers, families, and schools. Recovery was iterative and non-linear, with persistent barriers and uneven progress. The study concludes that educational recovery requires both academic remediation and psychosocial support. Schools should integrate scaffolded instruction, confidence-building opportunities, guidance services, and coordinated learner monitoring. Findings are context-bound to 18 learners in one school, and the resulting model has not undergone external empirical validation. The proposed FIRMS Model contributes a context-sensitive explanation of academic self-belief reconstruction and may inform more inclusive and sustainable learning recovery aligned primarily with SDG 4 (Quality Education), with complementary relevance to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Keywords: *Academic Confidence, Academic Identity, Educational Disruption, FIRMS Model, Grounded Theory, Learning Loss, Self-Belief Reconstruction*

1. INTRODUCTION

Prolonged educational disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and recurring natural disasters have affected students' learning continuity, academic engagement, and confidence in their educational abilities. A systematic review by Betthäuser et al. (2023) documented substantial learning deficits associated with pandemic-related school closures, while Fray et al. (2023) emphasized the challenges students encountered when returning to classroom learning, particularly regarding engagement and psychological well-being. The global learning crisis has consequently highlighted the importance of recovery initiatives that address both academic competencies and students' readiness to participate meaningfully in education (World Bank et al., 2022). In the Philippines, educational vulnerability is intensified by recurring typhoons and disruptions to schooling. Lagmay and Rodrigo (2022) demonstrated how extreme weather conditions affected students' participation in online learning, while Abrigo et al. (2024) examined the adverse educational consequences of disaster-related school closures. National assessments have also identified persistent learning challenges and the need for coordinated recovery efforts (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; Second Congressional Commission on Education [EDCOM II], 2025). Although existing literature addresses learning loss, academic resilience, and educational recovery, greater understanding is needed of how disaster-affected learners reconstruct their belief in their academic capabilities. Accordingly, this study investigated the experiences of secondary school learners at Toledo National Vocational School in Toledo City, Cebu, using Straussian grounded theory to explain the processes through which academic self-belief is reconstructed after prolonged learning disruption.

Research Problem

Educational disruptions create challenges extending beyond measurable learning deficits. Students may experience academic uncertainty, diminished confidence, psychological distress, and difficulties re-engaging with learning activities. Strasser et al. (2023) demonstrated the relevance of family circumstances to adolescents' academic self-efficacy and emotional experiences during educational disruption. Similarly, Ye et al. (2024) identified individual, family, school, peer, and community factors as important dimensions in understanding academic resilience. For learners in disaster-affected communities, repeated interruptions may further complicate educational recovery. Musarandega and Masocha (2023) documented how disaster-related disruptions affected school systems and learning continuity, while Pacheco et al. (2022) emphasized schools' role in supporting children's psychosocial resilience through belonging, social relationships, and shared meaning-making. At Toledo National Vocational School, prolonged learning interruptions associated with the pandemic and natural disasters provided the context for investigating students' efforts to regain academic confidence. Although educational recovery research has examined learning deficits and resilience, the specific processes through which secondary learners reinterpret academic difficulties, adopt coping strategies, and reconstruct academic self-belief remain insufficiently explained in comparable disaster-affected vocational school settings. This study therefore addressed the need for a contextually grounded explanation of how learners reconstruct academic confidence following prolonged learning loss, particularly the challenges, experiences, strategies, and support systems involved in that process.

Assumptions of the Study

The study was guided by an interpretivist-constructivist worldview, which recognizes that learners construct meanings from their experiences and social interactions. It assumed that academic confidence is not a fixed characteristic but a contextually shaped perception that may change as students interpret challenges, experience academic progress, and interact with their

learning environments. Contemporary research on academic self-efficacy and resilience supports examining learners' personal characteristics alongside their family, school, and social circumstances (Strasser et al., 2023; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). Ontologically, the study assumed that learners experience multiple, context-dependent realities rather than a single universal pathway toward academic recovery. Epistemologically, knowledge about confidence reconstruction was understood to emerge through interactions between participants and the researcher. Axiologically, the study acknowledged the researcher's educational commitments and interpretive role while emphasizing reflexivity, sensitivity to participants' experiences, and systematic examination of emerging interpretations. Methodologically, the study assumed that the reconstruction of academic self-belief could be explained through the conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences identified in participants' narratives. Straussian grounded theory was therefore considered appropriate because its systematic coding and constant comparative procedures support the development of explanatory categories and substantive theory from qualitative evidence (Akkaya, 2023). These assumptions served as methodological and philosophical foundations rather than predetermined conclusions about how participants recovered their academic confidence.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to develop a substantive grounded theory explaining how secondary school learners reconstructed their academic confidence after prolonged learning loss caused by educational disruptions. Specifically, it sought to identify the academic, emotional, and psychological challenges experienced by learners; examine how students interpreted these challenges in relation to their academic identity and confidence; explore the processes through which academic self-belief was gradually reconstructed; determine the coping strategies, adaptive behaviors, and support resources involved in recovery; and integrate the emerging categories into a grounded theoretical model explaining academic confidence reconstruction among disaster-affected learners at Toledo National Vocational School.

Theoretical or Conceptual Basis

The study was anchored in academic self-efficacy, resilience, and academic identity as sensitizing concepts for understanding learners' confidence reconstruction. Academic self-efficacy reflects students' perceived ability to accomplish learning tasks, while resilience emphasizes adaptation to educational challenges (Strasser et al., 2023; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). These concepts are shaped by individual, family, school, peer, and community support systems (Ye et al., 2024). Academic identity further explains how learners interpret their abilities and reconstruct self-belief through social interactions and educational experiences (Pacheco et al., 2022). These perspectives guided the investigation without imposing predetermined recovery stages. Straussian grounded theory provided the methodological foundation for developing an explanatory model through open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and constant comparison (Akkaya, 2023). This approach enabled the identification of interconnected conditions, adaptive strategies, support–barrier dynamics, and outcomes underlying academic self-belief reconstruction following prolonged learning disruption.

The study primarily supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive and sustainable learning recovery among students affected by prolonged educational disruptions. Its emphasis on rebuilding academic confidence contributes to educational participation, equity, and continuity in disaster-prone communities (United Nations, 2024; EDCOM II, 2025). It also aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) by addressing learners' emotional and psychological challenges, particularly anxiety, self-doubt, and resilience, highlighting the importance of psychosocial support in academic recovery (Fray et al., 2023; Pacheco et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study contributes indirectly to SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by emphasizing educational resilience and continuity in disaster-affected school communities (Lagmay & Rodrigo, 2022; Musarandega & Masocha, 2023). Overall, the study advances educational sustainability by providing a grounded theoretical basis for learner-centered recovery strategies that integrate academic confidence, psychosocial well-being, and community resilience.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study utilized Straussian grounded theory within an interpretivist-constructivist philosophical framework to explain the processes through which learners reconstructed academic confidence following prolonged educational disruption. This approach recognized that knowledge emerged through participants' experiences and interactions with the researcher, while learning loss and academic confidence were treated as sensitizing concepts rather than predetermined analytical categories (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Straussian grounded theory guided the systematic development of concepts and relationships through open coding, axial coding, selective coding, constant comparison, and theoretical integration (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, allowing emerging categories to inform subsequent interviews and theoretical sampling. The approach emphasized identifying the conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences associated with academic self-belief reconstruction rather than statistically generalizing the participants' experiences. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the investigation through analytical memoing, examination of assumptions, and documentation of coding decisions and category refinement. These procedures supported theoretical sensitivity and minimized the imposition of preconceived interpretations on participants' accounts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Research Locale or Study Setting

The study was conducted at Toledo National Vocational School (TNVS), a public secondary educational institution in Toledo City, Cebu, Philippines, offering Junior High School and Senior High School programs, including the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood track. The institution serves learners from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and has experienced educational interruptions associated with natural disasters, school suspensions, changes in learning modalities, and challenges during modular instruction. The school was selected because its disaster-related experiences provided a relevant setting for examining how learners regained confidence following prolonged interruptions to their education. The participants' varied academic and personal circumstances enabled the investigation of different recovery experiences and support conditions. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private, and participant-appropriate locations within the school to facilitate comfortable and confidential discussions.

Participants or Data Sources

The study involved 18 secondary school learners from Toledo National Vocational School who had experienced prolonged educational instability and subsequently re-engaged in formal schooling. Participants represented Junior and Senior High School learners with different academic experiences and socioeconomic circumstances. Eligibility considered their exposure to significant educational disruptions, willingness to share their experiences, and efforts to reconstruct academic self-belief. Initial participants were identified through purposive sampling, which enabled the selection of students with direct experiences relevant to the research phenomenon (Kalu, 2019; Khan, 2014). Theoretical sampling was subsequently employed to

explore emerging concepts and relationships by selecting participants whose experiences could further explain developing categories (Conlon et al., 2020; McCrae & Purssell, 2016). Differences in participants' backgrounds supported the examination of varied recovery experiences and adaptive responses (Gomersall & Floyd, 2022; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). Participant selection and analysis were guided by theoretical saturation, which was assessed when further interviews no longer produced significant new properties, dimensions, or relationships within the emerging categories (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018; Sbaraini et al., 2011; Squire et al., 2024). This process supported the development of sufficiently explanatory categories for the phenomenon under investigation (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Research Instruments or Materials

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, with the researcher serving as the main instrument for qualitative data collection and interpretation (Kalender et al., 2023). The guide was developed from the study objectives and covered four domains: educational disruption, academic confidence and identity, coping and recovery processes, and support from family, peers, teachers, and institutions. Three experts validated the instrument based on content relevance, age appropriateness, language clarity, and cultural suitability (Edgar et al., 2024; Eli et al., 2022). Their recommendations guided revisions to improve clarity and contextual relevance. The guide remained flexible to accommodate emerging categories during data collection (Kalender et al., 2023). Clarification, example-based, and comparative probing techniques were used to obtain detailed responses (Bhalla et al., 2023). Interviews were conducted in English and Cebuano according to participants' preferences to ensure authentic expression and cultural sensitivity (Kalender et al., 2023).

Data Gathering Procedure

Data gathering followed an iterative grounded theory process involving preparation, interviews, and post-data collection activities, with data collection and analysis conducted concurrently (Kalu, 2019; Khan, 2014). After obtaining permission from the school principal, the researcher coordinated with school personnel to identify eligible participants through purposive sampling (Kalu, 2019). The interview protocol was developed from relevant literature (Bowen, 2006; Wilson, 2012), reviewed for content and cultural appropriateness (Edgar et al., 2024; Eli et al., 2022), and administered after securing the required parental consent, student assent, or informed consent (Ederio et al., 2023; Rai & Mantaring, 2024). Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in private school settings outside regular class hours. Open-ended questions and probing explored participants' academic difficulties, emotional responses, coping strategies, and confidence recovery (Kalender et al., 2023). Field notes and reflexive memos documented observations and supported subsequent analysis (Coleman & O'Connor, 2007; Gentles et al., 2014). Initial interviews explored general learning disruptions, while subsequent interviews examined emerging categories, including peer support and academic re-engagement, through theoretical sampling (Conlon et al., 2020; McCrae & Purssell, 2016). Data collection continued until the emerging categories were sufficiently developed (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018; Squire et al., 2024). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and Cebuano responses were translated into English while preserving participants' intended meanings (Eli et al., 2022). Transcripts, field notes, and analytical memos supported the analysis, while an audit trail documented methodological decisions and category development (Sbaraini et al., 2011; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Straussian grounded theory through concurrent and iterative data collection and analysis (Kalu, 2019; Khan, 2014). Open coding identified meaningful experiences

and perceptions related to learning disruption and academic confidence, which were organized into conceptual categories (Kalender et al., 2023; Khan, 2014). Axial coding examined relationships among conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences, while selective coding integrated the major categories into a substantive model of academic self-belief reconstruction (Foley et al., 2021; Sbaraini et al., 2011). Constant comparison, analytical memoing, and theoretical saturation guided category refinement and theoretical development (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Research trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through continuous comparison of participant accounts, field notes, and analytical memos (Gentles et al., 2014; Sbaraini et al., 2011). Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of participants and the research setting (Gomersall & Floyd, 2022; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting methodological decisions and coding procedures (Sbaraini et al., 2011; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Confirmability was reinforced through participants' direct statements and reflexive documentation of researcher assumptions (Cadili & Whitley, 2005; Foley et al., 2021). These procedures ensured that the emerging theory remained grounded in participants' experiences.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed ethical safeguards emphasizing informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, participant well-being, fairness, and cultural sensitivity (Gomersall & Floyd, 2022; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). Parental consent and student assent were obtained for participants below 18 years old, while adult participants provided informed consent (Ederio et al., 2023; Rai & Mantaring, 2024). All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to decline questions, and their freedom to withdraw without academic consequences (Ederio et al., 2023). Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, removal of identifying information, and password-protected research files accessible only to the researcher (Desmet et al., 2023; Eli et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted in private, neutral settings to minimize power imbalances and ensure participants' comfort. Participants could pause or discontinue interviews when experiencing emotional distress, while appropriate safeguards supported their psychological well-being (Eli et al., 2022; Uicheng & Chobphon, 2024). Fair participant selection, respectful communication, and the use of Cebuano when appropriate ensured cultural and linguistic sensitivity (Kalender et al., 2023). Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to protect participants' dignity, autonomy, privacy, and well-being.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Academic Fragmentation Following Prolonged Learning Disruption

3.1.1 Disrupted in Academic Self-Perception

The findings revealed that educational disruptions affected learners' comprehension, study routines, and ability to manage academic responsibilities. Participants P1, P6, P12, P13, and P18 reported difficulty understanding lessons without direct teacher explanations, while P5, P6, and P12 experienced limited instructional guidance. Other participants described forgotten lessons, difficulties completing learning modules, disrupted study schedules, and challenges managing independent learning. These experiences were reflected in the initial codes of Learning Confusion, Limited Teacher Guidance, Learning Loss and Module Difficulty, Loss of Learning Structure, and Self-Regulation Difficulty. These findings indicate that prolonged educational disruption affected not only access to instruction but also the continuity and organization of learning experiences. Betthäuser et al. (2023) documented substantial learning deficits associated with pandemic-related educational disruptions, while Lagmay and Rodrigo (2022) demonstrated how extreme weather conditions affected learners' participation in online

education. The present findings extend these discussions by showing how learners perceived disrupted comprehension and learning routines as challenges to rebuilding confidence in their academic capabilities.

3.1.2 Emotional, Psychological, and Motivational Challenges

The interviews also revealed academic stress, anxiety, frustration, fatigue, and declining motivation following prolonged learning disruption. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by accumulated school requirements, fearing incorrect answers, and becoming discouraged when repeated efforts did not immediately improve their understanding. Some learners reported reduced interest in studying, disconnection from teachers and classmates, and uncertainty about their ability to recover academically. These experiences were represented by Academic Stress, Academic Overload, Academic Anxiety, Learning Frustration, Decreased Motivation, School Disconnection, and Academic Fatigue. The findings suggest that academic fragmentation was accompanied by emotional and motivational difficulties that complicated students' re-engagement with learning. Strasser et al. (2023) identified associations among adolescents' academic self-efficacy, emotional experiences, and family circumstances during pandemic-related disruptions. Similarly, Stang-Rabrig et al. (2024) emphasized the relevance of self-efficacy, resilience, and social resources to students' well-being and learning during challenging circumstances. These studies support considering emotional recovery alongside academic remediation when interpreting learners' experiences of diminished confidence.

3.2 Disrupted Academic Identity and Self-Belief

3.2.1 Changes in Academic Self-Perception

The findings showed that participants' academic difficulties influenced how they perceived themselves as learners. Participants P1, P5, and P13 described diminished confidence, while P4, P7, and P17 perceived themselves as different or less capable than before the disruptions. Other learners questioned their ability to understand lessons, complete academic tasks, and perform successfully in school. The resulting concepts included Shift in Self-Belief, Altered Learner Identity, Negative Academic Identity, Reduced Academic Confidence, and Academic Competence Doubt. These experiences suggest that repeated academic difficulties were interpreted by some learners as indications of reduced personal capability rather than temporary learning challenges. Strasser et al. (2023) demonstrated the importance of examining adolescents' perceived academic competence alongside their emotional experiences. Stang-Rabrig et al. (2024) also identified self-efficacy as a significant personal resource associated with learning-related outcomes. In the present study, the transition from difficulty understanding lessons to doubting personal academic ability represented an important dimension of disrupted academic identity.

3.2.2 Fear of Failure and Academic Disengagement

Participants also reported hesitation to answer questions, fear of committing mistakes, and avoidance of demanding academic activities. Some learners became uncertain about their academic future, while others reduced their participation because they perceived themselves as unable to meet classroom expectations. These experiences reflected Self-Doubt in Ability, Fear of Failure, Academic Insecurity, and Fear-Driven Avoidance. These findings indicate that diminished academic confidence was associated with changes in learning participation and motivation. Shao and Kang (2022) found that self-efficacy and academic resilience were relevant

mechanisms linking peer relationships with adolescents' learning engagement. Daley et al. (2025) likewise identified school connectedness as relevant to students' academic self-efficacy during disrupted learning. The findings of the present study suggest that reconstructing academic confidence involves addressing learners' perceptions of personal capability together with their willingness to participate in academic activities.

3.3 Adaptive Recovery Processes

3.3.1 Relearning and Self-Directed Academic Strategies

The findings revealed that students adopted different strategies to address learning gaps and rebuild academic competence. Participants P1 and P11 reviewed previous lessons, while P2, P13, and P16 returned to foundational concepts before attempting more difficult materials. Participants P4 and P6 engaged in self-directed learning, whereas P5, P9, P14, and P15 increased practice and repetition. Other learners developed study schedules, improved task management, and focused on understanding lessons rather than merely completing assignments. These actions formed the concepts of Lesson Review Strategy, Foundational Learning Approach, Self-Directed Learning, Practice and Reinforcement, Study Planning and Time Management, and Meaning-Focused Learning. The findings suggest that academic confidence reconstruction involved deliberate efforts to regain understanding and control over learning activities. Uicheng and Chobphon (2024) identified adaptability, self-directed learning, personal aspirations, and support resources as relevant dimensions of academic resilience among secondary school students during crises. Ye et al. (2024) similarly examined individual learning practices, engagement, and school-related resources as potential protective factors in academic resilience. The participants' experiences demonstrate how practical learning strategies formed part of their reported recovery processes.

3.3.2 Gradual and Recursive Confidence Reconstruction

The analysis identified a recurring recovery pattern involving initial struggle, intentional attempts to re-engage, gradual adjustment, and improved understanding. Learners initially described confusion, stress, reduced motivation, and self-doubt. They subsequently resumed studying, modified their learning practices, sought assistance, and recognized small academic improvements. Participants P1, P3, P9, P14, and P16 associated correct answers and improved comprehension with renewed confidence. However, the process was not consistently linear, as some learners returned to confusion or uncertainty before making further progress. These findings characterize academic self-belief reconstruction as a gradual and recursive process rather than an immediate recovery outcome. Uicheng and Chobphon (2024) emphasized the importance of adaptability and supportive conditions in students' academic resilience, while Ye et al. (2024) described academic resilience research as encompassing different approaches to understanding adaptation over time. The present findings suggest that repeated learning efforts, adjustments, and perceived academic progress helped learners reinterpret their capabilities and regain confidence.

3.4 Support–Barrier Dynamics in Academic Recovery

3.4.1 Personal, Family, Teacher, and Peer Support

The findings identified several sources of support that learners used during academic recovery. Participants described breaking large tasks into manageable activities, setting goals, accepting gradual progress, developing self-discipline, and using positive self-talk. Teacher explanations

and encouragement were reported by P1, P4, P7, P10, P13, and P16, while P2, P5, P9, P11, P14, and P18 identified family support. Participants P3, P6, and P15 reported academic assistance from classmates, and P8, P12, and P17 described emotional encouragement from friends. These experiences formed the categories of self-regulated academic recovery and relational support. The findings indicate that confidence recovery involved both individual adaptation and interpersonal assistance. Shao and Kang (2022) reported positive associations among peer relationships, self-efficacy, resilience, and learning engagement, while Shao et al. (2024) identified learning motivation and engagement as mechanisms connecting peer relationships with academic achievement. Ye et al. (2024) further highlighted the relevance of individual, family, school, peer, and community factors to academic resilience. These studies provide a basis for interpreting the participants' experiences of academic recovery as socially supported rather than exclusively individual.

3.4.2 Institutional Recovery Support

Participants identified school-based resources that helped them address learning difficulties. These included remedial instruction, review activities, learning materials, teacher feedback, flexible deadlines, collaborative learning opportunities, counseling services, instructional adjustments, and supportive school environments. Such resources enabled learners to revisit difficult concepts, receive clarification, manage academic requirements, and participate more confidently in learning activities. The emerging concepts included Remedial Learning Support, Learning Resource Provision, Instructional Feedback Support, Flexible Academic Policy, School Counseling Support, and Instructional Adaptation. These findings suggest that school-based assistance provided an important context for academic confidence reconstruction. Daley et al. (2025) found that connectedness to science teachers was particularly relevant to middle school students' science self-efficacy during pandemic learning. Similarly, Shao et al. (2025) identified positive relationships among teacher support, academic self-efficacy, psychological resilience, and secondary school students' learning engagement. Pacheco et al. (2022) also emphasized the psychosocial significance of schools in disaster settings. The present findings demonstrate how participants experienced instructional and psychosocial resources as complementary forms of recovery support.

3.4.3 Persistent Barriers to Academic Recovery

Despite the availability of coping strategies and support systems, participants continued to experience academic pressure, incomplete understanding, distractions, overthinking, fatigue, and insufficient assistance. Participants P1 and P14 described pressure from demanding academic workloads, while P6 and P17 reported concentration difficulties. Participants P2, P10, and P13 acknowledged slow progress because of continuing learning gaps. These difficulties were organized into Academic Recovery Barriers, Internal and Environmental Barriers, and Emotional and Cognitive Barriers. The findings suggest that recovery strategies operated within conditions that could either facilitate or constrain academic progress. Ye et al. (2024) emphasized that the relationship between protective factors and academic resilience varies according to context, measurement, and research design. Strasser et al. (2023) likewise identified the importance of family circumstances in understanding learners' self-efficacy and emotional experiences. In the present study, barriers did not necessarily prevent recovery, but they shaped the pace and nature of learners' attempts to rebuild confidence.

3.5 Integration of Major Categories

3.5.1 Relationships Among Academic Fragmentation, Identity, Recovery, and Support

Axial coding established relationships among the major categories identified during the interviews. Academic Fragmentation emerged as the causal condition within the grounded theory paradigm, encompassing disrupted instruction, learning gaps, weakened study routines, and emotional strain. Disrupted Academic Identity represented the interpretive context through which learners developed self-doubt and diminished confidence. Adaptive Recovery Processes described the actions students undertook to regain academic understanding, while Support–Barrier Dynamics represented intervening conditions affecting their recovery. These categories were connected to the consequence of Reconstructed Academic Confidence. This integration demonstrates that academic self-belief reconstruction was interpreted as a process involving learning conditions, personal interpretations, adaptive actions, and contextual resources. Akkaya (2023) described the systematic grounded theory approach as a means of developing conceptual relationships from qualitative data. The present analysis followed this logic by connecting the learners' reported experiences into an explanatory framework. These relationships are grounded theoretical interpretations and should not be understood as statistically established causal effects.

3.5.2 Reconstructed Academic Confidence as an Emerging Outcome

The analysis showed that learners gradually regained confidence through improved lesson comprehension, repeated academic participation, successful task completion, and increased willingness to address learning challenges. Participants associated renewed confidence with their ability to answer questions correctly, manage academic responsibilities, seek help, and continue learning despite previous difficulties. However, the extent of recovery varied, and not all learners reported complete restoration of confidence. The findings suggest that reconstructed academic confidence emerged through accumulated learning experiences and the interaction between adaptive strategies and contextual support. Stang-Rabrig et al. (2024) highlighted the relevance of personal and social resources to learners' educational experiences, while Uicheng and Chobphon (2024) identified adaptability and support as important dimensions of resilience during crises. These studies are consistent with the interpretation that academic confidence reconstruction depends on more than academic remediation alone.

3.6 Emergent Grounded Theory of Academic Self-Belief Reconstruction

3.6.1 Core Category and Theoretical Explanation

Selective coding integrated the major categories into the core category, Reconstructing Academic Confidence After Prolonged Learning Loss. The emerging theoretical explanation begins with Academic Fragmentation, wherein learners experience disrupted comprehension, weakened routines, and emotional strain. These experiences contribute to Disrupted Academic Identity as learners question their academic abilities. Through Adaptive Recovery Processes, students attempt to regain understanding and participation by reviewing lessons, practicing, seeking assistance, and adjusting learning behaviors. Support–Barrier Dynamics influence these efforts, while repeated engagement and perceived academic improvement contribute to Reconstructed Academic Confidence. The emergent theory explains academic confidence recovery as a dynamic, context-dependent, and potentially recursive process. Akkaya (2023) emphasized the role of systematic conceptual integration in developing grounded theory

explanations, while Ye et al. (2024) demonstrated the multidimensional nature of resilience and its contextual protective factors. The present study contributes a participant-grounded explanation of how academic self-belief can be reconstructed through changing interpretations, adaptive learning practices, and available social and institutional supports. Its theoretical propositions are specific to the participants' experiences and provide a basis for further examination in comparable disaster-affected educational settings.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that rebuilding academic confidence after prolonged learning loss involves more than recovering missed knowledge and academic competencies. Based on the experiences of 18 learners at Toledo National Vocational School, the findings revealed that educational disruptions were associated with academic fragmentation, emotional difficulties, weakened motivation, and disrupted academic identity. Learners gradually reconstructed their self-belief through reviewing lessons, repeated practice, help-seeking, self-regulated learning, and positive reinterpretation of academic difficulties. Teacher guidance, peer assistance, family encouragement, and institutional support contributed to their recovery experiences, while persistent learning gaps and psychosocial barriers complicated progress. These interconnected findings informed the development of the FIRMS Model, which explains academic confidence reconstruction as a dynamic, iterative, and non-linear process. The study contributes a context-specific grounded theory emphasizing that educational recovery should address academic competence, psychosocial well-being, learner identity, and sustained participation rather than learning deficits alone.

Educational institutions should strengthen learning recovery initiatives by integrating academic remediation, confidence-building activities, and psychosocial support. Teachers should assess learners' foundational competencies, provide scaffolded instruction, organize remedial and review sessions, and create supportive classroom environments that encourage participation without excessive pressure. Learning journals, attainable academic goals, constructive feedback, and opportunities for incremental success should be incorporated into instruction to strengthen self-belief and self-regulated learning. School administrators should establish coordinated support systems involving teachers, guidance personnel, parents, and peers to monitor academic progress, participation, motivation, and emotional well-being. Flexible learning arrangements and differentiated instruction should also be considered for learners experiencing persistent difficulties. The Department of Education and relevant educational stakeholders may use the FIRMS Model as a conceptual guide when designing context-responsive recovery programs. Future researchers should examine the model through longitudinal, quantitative, mixed-methods, and comparative studies to evaluate its applicability and refine its theoretical propositions.

This study was limited to 18 secondary school learners from Toledo National Vocational School in Toledo City, Cebu, whose experiences reflected a specific disaster-affected educational context. Its qualitative Straussian grounded theory design emphasized participants' narratives and the development of a substantive theoretical explanation rather than statistical generalization. The investigation did not include teachers' or administrators' perspectives, standardized measurements of academic achievement, or experimental evaluation of recovery interventions. Furthermore, the FIRMS Model was generated from the participants' accounts and requires further empirical validation. Subsequent studies involving additional schools, diverse learner populations, and longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches may strengthen its transferability and explanatory applicability.

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