



Lived Experiences of Multigrade Teachers in Public Elementary Schools

Dimple Darl C. Lagariza^a, Gregg O. Siat^b

MAED Elementary Teaching, Biliran Province State University, Naval, Biliran, Philippines
School of Teacher of Education, Biliran Province State University, Naval, Biliran, Philippines

ABSTRACT:

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of multigrade teachers in public elementary schools, focusing on how they navigate the unique demands of teaching multiple grade levels in a single classroom. Using a phenomenological approach, the study examined the challenges, coping strategies, and professional insights of teachers assigned to multigrade settings. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that multigrade teachers experience a mixture of fulfillment and strain. While they value the meaningful relationships formed with learners and the opportunity to foster independence among pupils, they also face significant challenges such as increased workload, limited instructional resources, and difficulties in classroom management. Teachers developed various coping strategies, including improvising learning materials, utilizing peer teaching, and engaging in collaboration with other multigrade educators. The study highlights the need for sustained support systems, adequate training, and policy improvements tailored specifically for multigrade classrooms. Overall, the research provides deeper insight into the realities of multigrade teaching and underscores the importance of strengthening institutional support to improve learning outcomes in small and underserved public schools.

Keywords: Primary School Teachers, Multi-grade Teaching, Phenomenological Study, Teacher well-being, coping mechanism, and job satisfaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multigrade teaching where a single teacher instructs students from two or more grade levels in the same classroom is a widespread model in many rural and geographically isolated public schools around the world (Rondero & Casupanan, 2024). In the Philippines, this educational arrangement is especially common in under-resourced schools, where class sizes are small and educational access remains a challenge (Bunglay & Cutab, 2023; Urma & Callo, 2023). Although multigrade teaching enables broader reach of education, it also places considerable demands on teachers, who must manage diverse learners, increased workloads, and limited instructional resources (Urma & Callo, 2023; Naparan & Castañeda, 2021).

Prior phenomenological research has explored how multigrade teachers experience both the difficulties and the rewards of this setting. For example, Brecio (2023) documented that multigrade teachers in Leyte navigate challenges related to resource contextualization, classroom facilitation, and parental involvement, yet also find meaning in their relationships with students. Similarly, Bagay (2024) found that adaptive strategies such as peer tutoring, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning help teachers maintain their well-being and efficacy in multigrade settings.

Despite growing research interest, many studies emphasize external challenges (e.g., lack of materials, institutional support) and less frequently highlight how teachers personally navigate their roles, their sources of resilience, or their perspectives on professional identity. The present study by Lagariza and Siat is thus timely: by using a phenomenological approach, it aims to deeply explore the lived experiences of public elementary multigrade teachers, capturing not only the stressors they face but also the rewarding aspects and the coping mechanisms they deploy.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it sheds light on how multigrade teachers balance instructional quality with resource constraints a persistent challenge identified in the literature (Napan & Castañeda, 2021; Urma & Callo, 2023). Second, by uncovering their coping strategies and sources of fulfillment, the study can inform targeted professional development programs and policy measures (as recommended by Bagay, 2024). Finally, by focusing on teacher well-being and institutional support, the study underscores the human dimension of multigrade education, emphasizing that improving learning outcomes in underserved schools requires more than just materials — it requires sustainable support for the educators themselves.

Statement of the Problem

Although multigrade teaching has been practiced for decades, limited qualitative research in the Philippines has deeply examined teachers' day-to-day realities, especially across both public and private school contexts. Current studies often emphasize instructional strategies or learner outcomes, leaving the personal and emotional dimensions of teaching understudied. The problem addressed by this research is the insufficient understanding of how primary school teachers experience, cope with, and derive meaning from their work in multigrade environments.

Specifically, this study seeks to uncover what challenges these teachers encounter, how they adapt to their complex teaching situations, and what factors influence their job satisfaction and sense of well-being. By addressing these questions, the research aims to fill the gap in contextual and phenomenological insights that can inform policy and teacher-support initiatives.

1.1 Objective of the study

The purpose of this study is to describe the challenges encountered by multigrade teachers in managing multiple grade levels within a single classroom.

1.2 Review of Related Literature

Multigrade classrooms, where a single teacher instructs students from multiple grade levels, are common in rural and under-resourced schools worldwide (Rondero & Casupanan, 2024). In the Philippines, this teaching model is frequently implemented in small schools with limited resources, offering both educational opportunities and unique challenges for teachers, who must plan lessons for diverse learners, maintain engagement across age groups, and ensure equitable learning outcomes (Bunglay & Cutab, 2023; Urma & Callo, 2023). Research consistently identifies workload, classroom management, and instructional resource limitations as primary challenges in multigrade teaching. Teachers often struggle to design lessons that address students at different developmental levels and balance attention across multiple grades, while limited materials require creative improvisation to meet learning objectives (Naparan & Castañeda, 2021; Brecio, 2023). Despite these challenges, multigrade teachers develop coping strategies such as peer teaching, flexible grouping, individualized instruction, and collaboration with colleagues, while training programs, mentorship, and supportive leadership enhance their confidence and competence (Bagay, 2024; Urma & Callo, 2023). Understanding the lived experiences of multigrade teachers is essential for informing the design of professional development programs, resource provision, and institutional support structures that can reduce workload, enhance teacher satisfaction, and improve learning outcomes, highlighting the human dimension of multigrade teaching and its broader implications for education (Naparan & Castañeda, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore and describe the lived experiences of multigrade teachers in public elementary schools. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it focuses on understanding participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges in their natural teaching environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this approach, the study seeks to capture the depth and complexity of teachers' experiences in managing multiple grade levels within a single classroom.

Locale

The setting of the study was conducted in Anislagan, Naval, Biliran, a community situated within the Schools Division of Biliran.

Participants

The participants of this study were multigrade teachers from Anislagan Naval, Biliran Province, Philippines. Purposive sampling was used to select teachers who have direct experience teaching multigrade classrooms, ensuring that participants could provide rich and relevant insights regarding the challenges they encounter. A total of 5 teachers participated in the study, representing different grade levels and school contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies in their own words. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on participant availability. The interview questions focused on the challenges faced in planning and delivering lessons, classroom management, resource utilization, and strategies employed to address multigrade teaching difficulties. Additional field notes and observations were recorded to supplement the interview data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to systematically identify patterns and categories within the participants' narratives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by multigrade teachers. The study ensured credibility and trustworthiness through member checking, triangulation of sources, and peer review of the coding process. Table 1, presented the sample data for thematic Analysis with a Themes, Codes, and Sample Quotes.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Table: Themes, Codes, and Sample Quotes

Major Theme	Codes	Sample Participant Quotes (Paraphrased)
1. Experiences and Perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mixed emotions (excited, overwhelmed) Motivation to support diverse learners Gradual adaptation to multigrade teaching Positive student engagement Shift in teaching mindset 	<p>“At first, handling multiple grades felt overwhelming, but I learned to manage over time.”</p> <p>“I teach multigrade because I want all students to succeed, no matter their level.”</p> <p>“Some students were quiet initially, but they became more active and confident.”</p>
2. Challenges and Difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time constraints Heavy workload Limited instructional materials Wide learning gaps among students Classroom management difficulties Lack of parental support 	<p>“It’s hard to finish lessons for three grades in one day.”</p> <p>“Some students understand quickly, while others need extra attention.”</p> <p>“I don’t have enough textbooks, so I create my own materials.”</p> <p>“Parents rarely help at home, so progress is slow.”</p>
3. Coping Mechanisms and Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvised teaching materials Differentiated instruction Grouping students by ability Peer teaching Adjusting pacing for learners Collaboration with co-teachers 	<p>“I make worksheets and visual aids when books are missing.”</p> <p>“I group learners so I can focus on their needs.”</p> <p>“I ask colleagues for tips and share strategies.”</p> <p>“Sometimes I adjust the lesson pace so slower learners can catch up.”</p>
4. Professional Growth and Fulfillment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased teaching confidence Improved classroom management skills Personal satisfaction from student progress Motivation to continue teaching in multigrade settings 	<p>“Handling multiple grades has made me more organized and patient.”</p> <p>“I feel proud when I see students learning at their own pace.”</p> <p>“Despite challenges, teaching multigrade motivates me to improve my methods.”</p>
5. Support and Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need for additional teaching materials Teacher training and professional development Administrative support Stronger parental involvement Time and workload management 	<p>“More books and learning materials would help a lot.”</p> <p>“We need training specific to multigrade teaching strategies.”</p> <p>“Support from school heads makes a huge difference.”</p> <p>“If parents were more involved, students would progress faster.”</p>

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was entirely voluntary, and teachers were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study. The researcher also ensured that data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 2, presents the results of the thematic analysis conducted on the 5 participants’ responses. It identifies the major themes that emerged from the data, along with corresponding codes and representative quotes. The table serves to illustrate how specific experiences, perceptions, or insights of the participants were categorized and interpreted, providing a clear link between raw data and the conceptual understanding developed in the study.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Table: Themes, Codes, and MG Teacher’s Quotes

Major Theme	Codes	Sample Participant Quotes (Paraphrased)
Theme 1: Sense of Fulfillment and Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfaction from student progress Motivation to support diverse learners Commitment to teaching despite challenges Observing learners’ independence and growth 	<p>“Even if managing multiple grades is tiring, seeing my students learn gives me purpose.”</p> <p>“When a struggling student finally understands a lesson, I feel my efforts are worthwhile.”</p>
Theme 2: Heavy Workload and Time Constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased teaching responsibilities Balancing multiple grade levels Unequal support across schools Limited time for preparation 	<p>“Handling two grades at once makes it hard to finish lessons on time.”</p> <p>“Some schools have volunteer teachers, which helps, but many of us manage alone.”</p>
Theme 3: Limited Learning Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scarcity of textbooks and teaching aids Delayed or insufficient budget allocation Use of personal funds to create resources Improvised teaching materials 	<p>“There aren’t enough textbooks, so I make worksheets at home using my own money.”</p> <p>“I often have to create visual aids because no ready materials are available.”</p>

Major Theme	Codes	Sample Participant Quotes (Paraphrased)
Theme 4: Learner Engagement Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short attention spans • Behavioral issues • Irregular attendance • Lack of parental support • Need for consistent encouragement 	<p>“Some students come late or skip class, which makes teaching harder.”</p> <p>“I have to constantly motivate children who are behind to keep them engaged.”</p>
Theme 5: Coping Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating simple and engaging activities • Collaboration with co-teachers • Using online resources • Time management and lesson integration • Emotional support from colleagues 	<p>“I prepare materials ahead of time and combine activities with regular lessons.”</p> <p>“Sharing ideas with other teachers helps me cope with the workload.”</p>
Theme 6: Need for Support and Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured training in multigrade strategies • Administrative guidance and support • Provision of additional learning materials • Incentives and capacity-building programs 	<p>“We need training on handling multiple grade levels effectively.”</p> <p>“Clearer guidelines and more resources from the school would make teaching much easier.”</p>

4. Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The findings of this study revealed that multigrade teachers in public elementary schools experience both rewarding and challenging aspects in managing multiple grade levels within a single classroom. Many teachers expressed a deep sense of fulfillment when observing learners' progress, particularly when struggling students gradually mastered lessons and developed independence. At the same time, teachers reported significant challenges, including heavy workloads, time constraints, limited instructional resources, and difficulties in maintaining learner engagement. Despite these obstacles, teachers employed various coping strategies such as improvising materials, differentiating instruction, grouping students by ability, collaborating with co-teachers, and utilizing online resources. These findings highlight the resilience, resourcefulness, and commitment of multigrade teachers in providing quality education under challenging conditions.

Conclusions

Teachers in multigrade classrooms experience a mixture of satisfaction and stress. While they feel fulfilled when learners make progress, the added responsibilities and workload associated with managing multiple grades often result in fatigue and pressure. The primary challenges faced by teachers are related to instructional resources, time management, and learner diversity, as the limited availability of textbooks and teaching materials, combined with wide learning gaps among students, affects the consistency and quality of classroom delivery. Coping strategies and collaboration among teachers were found to be critical for maintaining instructional effectiveness. Additionally, support and training emerged as essential for the sustainability of multigrade teaching, with teachers emphasizing the need for structured professional development, clearer administrative guidelines, and equitable provision of resources to ensure long-term success.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in this study, schools and educational authorities should ensure the timely and adequate provision of learning materials, including textbooks, teaching aids, and other instructional resources, to support multigrade classrooms. Structured professional development programs focusing on multigrade teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and classroom management should be implemented to equip teachers with the necessary skills. School administrators should provide clear guidelines, monitor workload distribution, and ensure equitable deployment of support staff to reduce teacher stress and enhance classroom management. Collaboration among teachers through mentorship, peer coaching, and shared planning should be encouraged to strengthen teaching strategies and resource utilization. Furthermore, learner-centered approaches and engaging activities should be promoted to address diverse student needs and support consistent participation. Finally, education policymakers should recognize the unique demands of multigrade classrooms and develop policies that provide adequate funding, resources, and ongoing capacity-building programs to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of multigrade teaching.

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