

Multi-Grade Teachers' Experiences in Multi-Grade Classrooms in Public Schools in the Philippines

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Abstract. This study examined teachers' experiences in multi-grade classrooms through a phenomenological approach. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected 10 participants. The participants were teaching in public schools in multi-grade classes for 5 years. Data saturation was considered in deciding on the number of participants. The data revealed that the participants were overwhelmed in teaching pupils at different levels simultaneously. The challenges of classroom management, lesson delivery, and various activities in one setting can lead to burnout and exhaustion. However, despite those challenges, their commitment to the teaching profession strengthened their roots to stay in the profession. Nevertheless, the challenge raises concerns in the education system that teachers in multi-grade classes must be given additional support to help them manage their workload and focus more on delivering quality education. The research emphasizes the necessity for augmented support and resources to improve the well-being and efficacy of multi-grade educators.

Keywords: Experiences; Multi-grade classrooms; Multi-grade teachers; Teaching profession.

1.0 Introduction

Education is a fundamental and pivotal pillar in a person's social development. It equips individuals with the essential skills and knowledge needed to live their lives in the best way possible. Basic education has an important purpose- to teach young minds about the world and develop skills and abilities that they can use to bring positive change to society. Thus, the government must offer appropriate educational possibilities for the growth of individuals and pupils.

In the Philippines, particularly in rural areas, schools lack adequate classrooms to accommodate their number of

students. Hence, multigrade teaching is being implemented in which a classroom consists of two grades taught by only one teacher. Multigrade teachers' teaching schedules and workloads are significantly heavier than those of single-grade classes. Moreover, the facilities and space these schools provide for their pupils are far more constrained than those of conventional classrooms. More complex and challenging are the design and execution of instruction, as well as the evaluation and class administration in multigrade classrooms (Aksoy, 2008).

According to Magno (2014), some elementary school teachers in the Philippines, particularly in isolated locations, face issues such as a lack of resources and insufficient training. Based on Castigador (2019), multigrade teachers then figure out better ways to serve their pupils. They even paid for their students' learning supplies using part of their own pay. Teachers distributed their materials for the well-being of their students. Malaudzi's study (2016) revealed that teachers, although qualified instructors, do not receive sufficient training concerning multi-grade teaching. Thus, challenges such as classroom management, work overload, and curriculum organization exist. Furthermore, it was also discovered that teachers developed an undesirable viewpoint on multi-grade teaching as it involves numerous tasks, which are stressful for teachers.

Accordingly, teachers play vital roles in helping individuals improve and change their lives. Teachers hold the key to an individual's destiny. The most demanding are multigrade teachers. They have numerous roles, including imparting knowledge to students, overcoming the challenges of managing diverse students and multigrade courses, and achieving the Department of Education's objective of "Quality Education." Seeking to demonstrate and attest that it competes with the monograde courses, even if it is a multigrade class. The literature indicates that multigrade education is most widespread in third-world nations. It is prevalent in isolated areas where students fall short of the minimum required to qualify as a monograde class. (Ballesteros & Ocampo, 2016).

Based on the research studies, Kalender & Erdem (2021) found that classroom teachers in multi-grade environments find the evaluation procedure demanding and challenging. They characterize this responsibility as one that calls for resilience, patience, and sacrifice, therefore testing the strength of the field. Another response suggests that teaching several grades can be demanding. Another response reveals that multi-grade teaching is tiring. It came from T6: "It is tiring, but it is nice when one gets their results." Ames (2004) also stated that Peruvian Amazon multigrade teachers see the multigrade as the "second class" need and monograde as the ideal norm. Teachers indicate inadequate instructional tools to promote learning in the multigrade classroom, feel ill-equipped when working in multigrade classes, and perceive that students do not "get the same" as in monograde classes. Teachers' hostile attitude toward the institution is reinforced by the isolating settings of employment and the poverty areas where the multigrade schools serve.

Moreover, despite these challenges, both teachers and students in the multigrade institution worked relentlessly and aimed to be relevant and practical. This thus inspired the studies on classroom techniques of teachers in managing multigrade classes. From the mentioned studies, they only discussed the common concerns that arise in multi-grade teaching, such as excessive workload, inadequate training, and insufficient resources. However, only a few have looked closely at what teachers go through. Not much is known about the realistic stories of teachers experiencing multi-grade classrooms. The researchers aim to gather the point of view and insights of multi-grade teachers through their experiences. This study would provide empirical data to help future teachers prepare for teaching at a multi-grade level.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This qualitative research study sought to explore teachers' lived experiences in a multigrade classroom environment. Qualitative methods were employed to obtain comprehensive, subjective insights from participants, enabling researchers to investigate the problems, strategies, motivations, and impact of multigrade teaching.

2.2 Research Locale

This study was carried out in Bohol, Philippines, which was recognized for implementing multi-grade classes. The selection of respondents guaranteed representation from various geographical regions and educational environments within the province. They were selected for their accessibility, pertinence to the research, and explicit execution of multigrade classes, which directly correspond with the study's emphasis.

2.3 Research Participants

The participants of this research are the 10 purposely selected participants who have been in multi-grade teaching for 5 years. Purposive sampling is an approach used to determine the participants based on their years of teaching experience. The participants are currently teaching in the Department of Education. Data saturation was the basis for the number of participants. All of them are teaching at a basic education level.

2.4 Research Instrument

This study employed a meticulously developed semi-structured interview questionnaire to explore teachers' perspectives in multi-grade classroom environments. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions. Each question was deliberately crafted to provide subtle insights and enhance comprehension of the participants' viewpoints. The semi-structured method allowed participants to expand on their comments, facilitating the capture of rich qualitative data. The instrument functioned as an effective means of revealing the complex narratives and varied experiences of educators in their academic endeavors.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

In the process of data gathering, the participants were first provided with a consent form, and the purpose of the study was clearly explained to them. Upon their approval, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, giving participants sufficient time to respond thoughtfully to each question. The interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The transcriptions were carefully examined to identify codes, patterns, and themes. For the data analysis, Creswell's (2013) model for qualitative research was adopted. The emerging themes were then analyzed and interpreted to capture and give meaning to the lived experiences of the teachers.

2.6 Data Analysis Procedure

This study employed thematic analysis, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), to investigate teachers' lived experiences in multigrade classrooms. By identifying, examining, and documenting patterns (themes) in qualitative data, thematic analysis provides a structured yet adaptable approach to investigate the main difficulties faced by teachers in multi-grade classrooms, the psychological and emotional effects of this teaching setting, and the factors that encourage them to continue in this demanding position. Key themes and emergent patterns were identified through methodical coding and transcription of the gathered qualitative data. The key themes that were obtained were critically scrutinized, interpreted, and discussed within the broader framework of the research purpose, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes. This process followed Creswell and Poth's (2017) paradigm of qualitative inquiry, to iteratively interact with data to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

This study complied with ethical standards to uphold all participants' dignity, rights, and welfare. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained; participants were accurately briefed on the objectives, methodologies, and voluntary nature of their participation. Maintaining data security rigorously ensured the preservation of secrecy. Empathy and respect will govern the interactions during the study process, ensuring that teachers' lived experiences in multigrade classrooms are treated with diligence and authentic consideration.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Multifaceted Academic Constraints

The theme encapsulates the limitations or challenges in the educational environment in a multigrade classroom. These challenges highlight teachers' various limitations in such settings, including time management, classroom management, catering to diverse learning needs, managing learning resources, overseeing learners' activities and assessments, and providing teachers' training. Derived from the research question, the theme highlights how these challenges impact the learning environment of a multigrade classroom and the teachers' adaptability in teaching style.

T3: "Key challenges in multi-grade classrooms include diverse learning levels, varying curriculum needs, classroom management, ensuring adequate engagement from all students/pupils, differentiated instruction, assessment of individual progress, and limited resources for supporting individual learning paths."

T3's response highlights that challenges are not incidental but structural, stemming from systems that overlook multigrade realities. It identifies the fundamental systematic and pedagogical challenges present in multigrade

classrooms, illustrating the practical realities of instruction alongside the broader educational obstacles encountered by educators.

T4: "Demanding the creation of varied learning activities and assessments to cater to the different skill levels and paces. Time management also becomes a significant hurdle. I must be strong and require creative strategies to cater to individual student needs."

T4 fulfills various roles, including planner, instructor, and assessor. Each role requires time, and the allocation of time per student or group diminishes when addressing multiple grades. Time poverty encompasses the limited hours available in a day and the cognitive burden associated with frequent shifts in focus. T4's statement summarizes the dual challenges of pedagogical innovation and systematic oversight in multigrade teaching. T4's response emphasizes that multigrade teaching should not be viewed as a deficiency but rather as an opportunity for systematic transformation. Their strength and creativity serve as survival strategies within a system that provides admiration. For a nation to achieve progress, quality education must be accessible to all learners. However, multigrade teachers face significant challenges in delivering effective instruction, including limited resources, diverse student needs, and the demand for simultaneous curriculum delivery across multiple grade levels. Despite these constraints, Ampo (2023) emphasizes that with proper pedagogical strategies and systemic support, multigrade classrooms can still foster critical thinking and civic engagement, equipping students to become productive contributors to national development.

3.2 Balancing Exhaustion and Fulfilment

The underlying theme in this question comes from research question number two, "What are the emotional and psychological effects of teaching in a multi-grade setting?" This theme only sums up how handling a multi-grade classroom affects the teacher's emotional and psychological well-being. These challenges expose teachers to numerous emotional and mental challenges, including a high risk of stress, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt, due to the complex demands of managing diverse learners and limited resources. These challenges lead to burnout, isolation, and a reduced sense of control. However, many educators also experience fulfillment, resilience, and increased job satisfaction from building strong relationships with students and witnessing their growth. Achieving success in this setting should entail adaptability, emotional strength, and continuous learning.

T2: "I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of ensuring the academic success of students across multiple grades."

T2's statement highlights the significant emotional and systematic pressure associated with multigrade teaching. This pressure originates from the necessity of achieving academic success across multiple grade levels. The teacher bears significant responsibility for students' academic performance in a multigrade environment. T2 faces challenges due to a lack of materials and support for effectively managing multiple grade levels. The teacher assumes responsibility for student outcomes, embodying a moral obligation prevalent among educators. The challenges escalate in multigrade classrooms, where educators manage conflicting curricula and varied students' requirements.

T7: "Witnessing the positive interactions between students, observing their progress, and fostering a sense of community within the classroom provides a strong sense of fulfillment."

T7's response highlights the emotional and psychological advantages of teaching in a multigrade environment. The teacher derives significant satisfaction from observing the positive relationships among students and their academic and social advancement. The sense of accomplishment surpasses the difficulties typically linked to managing multiple grade levels within a single classroom. Furthermore, fostering a close-knit, cooperative learning atmosphere benefits teachers' emotional health and job happiness. T7's experience indicates that multigrade teaching can be challenging but also provides significant advantages that can enhance a teacher's mental and emotional perspective.

T9: "Emotionally, I may experience stress, frustration, and feelings of being overwhelmed due to the demands of managing different grade levels and meeting diverse learning needs."

T9's response illustrates handling a multigrade classroom's emotional and psychological burdens. The educator expresses stress, frustration, and overload due to the demands of managing students across multiple grade levels.

Addressing the varied learning requirements of these individuals exacerbates the difficulty, necessitating additional work in planning and instruction. Creating distinct lessons and tests for every school level can be mentally draining. It underscores the complex and emotionally stressful nature of the multigrade teaching environment. T9's experience illustrates the significant burdens imposed on educators in these environments, frequently impacting their well-being.

3.3 Commitment to Teaching Profession

This theme is derived from the research question: "What are your motivations to continue teaching in multi-grade?". This theme explores the various reasons that compel multi-grade teachers to persist in their roles despite their numerous challenges. These motivations can serve as an inspiration for multigrade teachers to make learning more relevant and engaging in classrooms, potentially leading to increased student participation in multi-grade settings. Teachers reported that their motivation arises from commitment and passion for education, a strong sense of fulfillment and purpose, a desire to make a difference in students' lives, student flourishing and growth, and professional development. It underscores the importance of teachers' motivations and commitment to their profession in maintaining positive and compelling learning experiences, which in turn leads to better outcomes for both teachers and students, while ensuring their well-being and continued effectiveness in the classroom, ultimately contributing to the curriculum's success.

T2: "Despite the challenges, a sense of duty to provide education to underserved students and witnessing their growth fuels my dedication to multi-grade teaching."

T2's response emphasizes the teacher's dedication to multi-grade instruction due to a profound feeling of responsibility. Despite the challenges of the work, T2 perceives it as her obligation to assist pupils with limited access to education. Supporting these students gives the teacher a sense of purpose. Observing the pupils' progress and development inspires multi-grade teachers to keep going. This advancement serves as a reminder to the educator that their endeavours are yielding positive outcomes. Their sense of duty and the fulfilling experience of assisting children in achieving their goals serve as their sources of motivation.

T9: "My motivation to continue teaching in a multigrade setting comes from a deep passion for education and the desire to make a difference in the lives of learners, especially in underserved communities."

T9 responses illustrate that, driven by a real passion for education, the statement captures a tremendous personal dedication to teaching. T9 emphasizes the teacher's will to bring about good change, especially for pupils from underprivileged neighborhoods. The reference to a multigrade environment points to flexibility and a readiness to welcome difficulties to help every student. T9 expresses an intentional and sincere drive to serve in areas of greatest need, highlighting the teacher's steadfast dedication to ensuring education is accessible and significant for every kid.

T10: "This sense of purpose, combined with the happiness their progress brings me, is what motivates me to continue teaching in a multigrade setting with dedication and heart."

T10 shows a strong emotional connection to education and finds excellent gratification in seeing how well students grow and achieve. T10 emphasizes that a genuine sense of purpose and fulfillment from student progress drives motivation beyond obligation and necessity. The reference to "dedication and heart" implies a complete commitment to the distinct requirements of a multigrade classroom. This demonstrates T10's determination and enthusiasm in confronting problems while supporting various learners. T10 demonstrates how personal fulfillment and a profound sense of purpose drive the educator's ongoing commitment in a multigrade environment.

A study by Lisondra (2023) found that multigrade teaching can be both stressful and fulfilling. The study elaborates that being a teacher is a sacrifice and a passion, as it requires a lot of dedication and resiliency to be effective. It requires a great deal of love for teaching to address all the needs of the learners and to continue even if it is too much to handle. In the end, teachers always consider the success of the students, not their success. The study reveals that teaching multigrades is challenging but also a blessing. It is very challenging due to the learners' diversity, the scarcity of learning materials, and the teachers' skills. However, the teachers motivate themselves despite the challenges because they are very concerned about how the learners will grow and thrive.

Furthermore, a study by Montalbo et al. (2021) found that teachers apprehended that teaching in multi-grade classrooms widened their dedication, passion, and commitment to teaching. Dedicated teachers recognize and do their best to fulfill their responsibilities to their students. Afandi et. al. (2021) stated that with a strong sense of duty, ownership, and success, teachers become equally devoted to learning. Truly, teaching is a lifelong duty (Robinos et al., 2020). When students demonstrated the needed competencies, teachers displayed enthusiasm. Teachers were pleased as they observed their students' growth.

The multifaceted constraints faced by teachers in teaching a multi-grade class are undeniably the most challenging aspect of teaching. A study by Jabiñar & Mustacisa (2024) shows that teachers in multigrade classrooms face more challenges than those in regular classrooms. These challenges prevent teachers from providing an engaging learning environment. Teachers struggle to differentiate instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of their pupils. Learners possess diverse learning needs due to various backgrounds and ages within the classroom. Hence, educators must understand how to perceive learning activities to accommodate the varying learning needs (Jabiñar & Mustacisa, 2024). The participants' statements suggest that diverse learning needs create a challenging environment, prompting teachers to develop differentiated instruction that aligns with the curriculum and learners' needs, albeit with time constraints. In the study by Ampo (2023), it is stated that quality education becomes more complex, necessitating teachers' experiences in such contexts to develop innovative strategies, adaptability, and a strong commitment to ensure that all learners receive equitable opportunities to learn despite resource limitations.

Aside from differentiated instruction, assessing the learners' progress is part of these challenges since the teacher teaches two grades in one classroom. Daga (2021) revealed that it is improper to deliver uniform assessment tools for all students when, in reality, these students were exposed to various learning practices and belong to diverse grade levels. This highlights that assessing learning in a multigrade classroom poses challenges for teachers. The statement from the teacher above indicates that diverse learning needs mean that assessment becomes more complex. Teachers must design different assessments for different grades; they cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach to assess the learners.

Another study from Pagadian City, Philippines, pointed out that teachers suffer from a lack of teaching materials and resources. Thus, they had to maximize their limited resources to teach multigrade classes. Due to insufficient resources, teachers also encounter difficulties refining pupils' abilities from various grade levels (Napanan & Castañeda, 2021). Furthermore, Daga (2021) stated that multigrade teachers face the constraint of time. They must complete all their classroom tasks before departing for home, although they have only a limited number of hours to finalize preparation for the following day's lesson. He suggested that a solution must be developed to alleviate the workload of multigrade teachers and improve their circumstances.

These studies have implicated that the constraints faced by multigrade teachers are a direct result of the multi-grade education set-up. The lack of sufficient classrooms and the availability of teachers to teach in a proper student-to-teacher ratio must be addressed by policymakers to help teachers increase their motivation in their chosen profession.

Moreover, the factors that led teachers to experience constraints in teaching resulted in them experiencing stress and burnout. Teaching has never been easy, especially when you are assigned to multi-grade classrooms, where your energy is doubled. A study by Napanan and Castañeda (2021) found that teaching in multigrades has become increasingly stressful and demanding, primarily due to the demands of school activities, reports, and co-curricular engagements, as well as the necessity of teaching two classes simultaneously. Teaching multiple grades simultaneously is tantamount to having two teachers. Multigrade teachers encounter significant challenges in their workload owing to their additional responsibilities and diverse roles within the school. The statement from the teachers mentioned above indicates that tasks considerably burden them. The participants pointed out that this situation hurt them and that they experienced exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is a symptom of burnout (Schulze-Hagenest, 2023).

In addition, Rotas (2020) specifies that teachers in multi-grade settings can effectively deal with the various taxing situations that arise in multi-grade teaching. The research indicated that multigrade teachers possess a strong

appreciation for their profession. The teacher experiences exhaustion from lesson planning and managing classroom behaviors, yet derives fulfillment from students' collaboration.

Nevertheless, this theme points out that teaching is an emotional duality, where fulfillment may alleviate exhaustion and, conversely, exhaustion can diminish fulfillment. The interplay between exhaustion and fulfillment is a survival mechanism and a transformative process for teachers.

Lastly, while teachers struggle with stress at work, it is still undeniable that a job is what sustains their daily needs, and thus resiliency and commitment to the profession should be their utmost choice. A study by Lisondra (2023) found that multigrade teaching can be both stressful and fulfilling. The study elaborates that being a teacher is a sacrifice and a passion, as it requires a lot of dedication and resiliency to be effective. It requires a great deal of love for teaching to address all the needs of the learners and to continue even if it is too much to handle. In the end, teachers always consider the success of the students, not their success. The study reveals that teaching multigrades is challenging but also a blessing. It is very challenging due to the learners' diversity, the scarcity of learning materials, and the teachers' skills. However, the teachers motivate themselves despite the challenges because they are very concerned about how the learners will grow and thrive.

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4.0 Conclusion

Teaching is a profession that should never be underestimated. In the Philippine public school system, teachers face daily challenges, particularly those handling multi-grade classes. Multi-grade teachers often share that they struggle with classroom management and lesson preparation, as teaching two grade levels simultaneously is one of the most demanding tasks. While their work compels them to exert extraordinary effort, it often results in stress and exhaustion. Nevertheless, their passion for teaching and commitment to the profession sustain their motivation to remain in service. The findings highlight the urgent need for additional classrooms and teachers to ensure an appropriate pupil-teacher ratio, as the current situation negatively impacts the quality of education. Educational planners and policymakers must give this issue serious attention. Immediate interventions and sustained support are necessary to help multi-grade teachers deliver quality education to young learners. For future research, a quantitative study on the work-life balance and well-being of teachers handling multi-grade classes should be conducted to provide deeper insights and evidence-based recommendations for improving teachers' professional and personal lives.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

The researchers indicate equal contribution to each section.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

We declare no conflict of interest.

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