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Research Article

Challenges and Opportunities in Multigrade Teaching: Experiences of Primary School Teachers in Far-Flung Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study finds out the opportunities and challenges in multigrade teaching: experiences of primary school teachers in far-flung schools in San Marcelino, Zambales. The study made use of qualitative research adhering to the phenomenological methods and data were thematically analyzed. Results of the study showed that the challenges encountered by multigrade teachers in far-flung schools are difficulty in handling classroom and time management, failing to consider the diversity of learners, inadequacy in teaching multiple grades and experiencing burnout in teaching. Multigrade teachers overcome challenges encountered through teachers' resourcefulness, understanding differences, teachers' resiliency, teachers' innovativeness, and support group system. Students use reappraising and evading as their boredom-coping strategies in Social Studies discussions. The opportunities experienced by the multigrade teachers are enhancing the self-esteem of teachers, recognizing shared responsibility for facilitating student learning and increasing the teaching proficiency of teachers. An enhancement program was proposed. The study recommends that the Department of Education (DepEd) may conduct seminars for good practices in teaching multigrade classes. Multigrade teachers may use varied teaching strategies and innovative instructional materials that will cater all learners' needs and for effective students' learning. Further studies may be conducted to validate the results of the study.

Keywords: *Challenges, Overcome, Opportunities, Multigrade teachers*

Introduction

The instruction of students from two or more grade levels in a single class is referred to as multigrade teaching. Such environments necessitate the adoption of particular

instructional approaches, strategies, and classroom management. These classes can be held more frequently since they can be conducted more affordably and with fewer students than in a traditional classroom. Since they don't have

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to travel far from their homes to get to school, kids are consequently more motivated to go to school.

Many of the multigrade schools in Southeast Asia were also founded in response to international commitments to education for all, including the Millennium Development Goals and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to UNESCO figures, there are 8,404 multigrade schools in Vietnam, 1,353 multigrade schools in 22 provinces of Cambodia, 135 multigrade schools in Timor Leste, and 66% of Indonesian schools are remote schools. There are roughly 7,952 multigrade schools in the Philippines. There are just four multigrade schools left in Malaysia.

Multigrade teaching occurs when one teacher handles more than one grade level (Little, 2001). The implementation also of multigrade education in the Philippines was strengthened by DO 81, s. 2009, as the government provided special hardship allowance, adequate training for multigrade teachers, giving of resource package and other benefits.

There are areas in the Philippines where total school enrolment is low, or there is a lack of teachers, making it necessary to combine different grade levels. Hence, in remote places, multigrade schools are present to endure significant contributions to education for all movement. As of the Academic year 2008-2009, 12,225 of 37,697 public elementary schools were multigrade (Villalino, 2010). It is not easy for a Multigrade teacher to experience that some pupils, especially the higher-grade level, who may not be listening while the teacher is discussing because they may already know the topic.

In the Philippines, the most common problems in multigrade classrooms are preparation and planning of daily lessons, the inadequacy of instructional materials, classroom management supervision, familiarity of different schemes in teaching multigrade classes, application of teaching methodology in real teaching-learning situations, lack of school facilities, schedule of activities, big class size, poor working conditions of teachers, inadequate pre and in-service training of teachers in specific skills related to multigrade teaching, and concern about the academic achievement of children

(Mirando, 2012, p. 117). Despite the challenges of teachers assigned in a multigrade environment, they give their best for their students' learning experience to be productive and meaningful (Napan & Alinsug, 2021). They even shared part of their salaries to produce learning materials for their students (Castigador, 2019).

Multigrade teaching constitutes a work environment full of difficulties and problems. Teachers' challenges should not be ignored, for they will be the basis on how to develop and help them promote quality education. In this background, the researcher considers it necessary to investigate opportunities and challenges in multigrade teaching: experiences of primary school teachers in far-flung schools in San Marcelino, Zambales.

Methods

Research Design

This research is qualitative research adhering to the phenomenological methods. According to Polit & Beck, (2012), the phenomenon or case can be a person, a group, an organization, or an event. The use of a single case study is an appropriate design for certain circumstances, including when the case represents (a) a critical situation to test the theory, (b) an authentic case, (c) a regular case that can facilitate understanding of usual circumstances, (d) an open case that previously has been inaccessible, or (e) a longitudinal case (Yin, 2014). The study is considered "a common case that can capture an understanding of usual circumstances" because of the experiences of teachers in the implementation of multigrade teaching.

Participants

The participants of the study were purposively chosen teachers teaching multigrade to elementary learners in the District of San Marcelino province of Zambales with at least one school year experience as such. This was considered because teachers who are new in the service are most likely to experience challenges and difficulties. However, teachers who are more than a year in multigrade teaching may also encounter difficulties that need to be addressed, hence they were also included.

Instrument

Data inquiry using researcher-made questionnaires was the main instrument used to gather the pertinent data for the study. This research utilized two means to collect data. First was an open-ended questionnaire related to the challenges and opportunities experienced by the multigrade teachers, the second was an informal interview to validate the teachers' responses in the open-ended questionnaire. The research instrument was subjected to construct and content validity. Three experts were asked to check the consistency of the items.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher constructed formal letter asking the School's Division Superintendent to conduct the study. Once given permission, the researcher approached the multigrade teachers' respective heads to inform them about the study. After meeting the school heads, the researcher then had the initial conversations with her target participants. The researcher introduced the research to the target participants and sought their consent to participate in the study. As the participants gave their consent, the researcher arranged with them a schedule for the interview. The researcher observed the most convenient time for the research participants during the interview. In gathering the data, the researcher upheld the Ethical principles necessary in collecting the qualitative data. The researcher treated the participants with the utmost respect. The researcher always preserved the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data they got. The

researcher concerned only with the essence of their experiences as to how they describe them. During the interview, the participants gave the freedom to finish or not the process. After the interview, the researcher recorded the data gathered and proceeded to data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Challenges Encountered by Multigrade Teachers

According to Naparan & Castaneda (2021), some teachers are still unprepared to teach multigrade classes, multigrade allowances may not be sufficient to cover costs, stressful work environments caused by the physical state of classrooms and buildings, language barriers, challenges managing the classroom, a lack of necessary materials and resources, risks associated with students' travel to school assignments, workload, absenteeism, a lack of stakeholder support, and a lack of training. There are difficulties involved in teaching multigrade classes that could cause teacher burnout. Some multigrade teachers in other parts of the world struggle with time constraints, transportation issues related to school assignments, poor communication with parents due to illiteracy, language, and cultural barriers, low socioeconomic status, and difficulties with the actual teaching and learning process. These first-hand accounts from multigrade educators in other nations resemble teachers' experiences in the Philippines quite a bit.

The challenges encountered by multigrade teachers in far-flung schools is shown in Table 1.

Question	Relevant Statements	F	Emerging Themes
What are the challenges you encountered as multigrade teachers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preparing different lessons for different level of learners preparation of learning materials, execution of the lessons and preparation of the multigrade lesson plan... Lack of references and ready-made lesson plan of multigrade classes As a multigrade teacher I experience insufficient time in handling classes..... Insufficient time sometimes in handling classes 	6	Difficulty in handling classroom and time management

Question	Relevant Statements	F	Emerging Themes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a multi grade teacher the challenges I encountered is insufficient time in handling classes and in the actual teaching. 		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cater the individual needs of each student... Teaching pupils with different personalities and characters learners' attitude towards learning Culture Undesirable attitude of some learners.... Guiding them with different intellectual differencesensuring the effectiveness of prepared differentiated instructions, strategy to be used since they have different abilities; and limited time to cope all the topics for 2 different grade levels. 	7	Failing to consider the diversity of learners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of training... It was hard to teach two grades in one classroom. 	2	Inadequacy in Teaching Multiple Grades
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ...as multigrade teacher are the tons of coordinations and reports ...amount of work 	2	Experiencing burnout in teaching

Based on the table presented, the challenges encountered by the teachers as multigrade teachers in far-flung schools are: classroom management, learners' individual differences, time management, lack of training and teachers' workload.

Difficulty in handling classroom and time management

Mirando (2012), in his study, revealed that the most common problems in multigrade classrooms were preparing different lessons for different levels of learners on a day-to-day basis, mismatches of trainings received to multigrade teaching (case-to-case basis), physical conditions of the classrooms, and absence of needed materials in teaching multigrade learners. The preparation and planning of daily lessons, inadequate instructional materials, classroom supervision, familiarity with various schemes for teaching multigrade classes, and the use of teaching methodology in actual teaching-learning situations are the most frequent issues in multigrade classrooms in the Philippines. While one group is working on a

task, the teacher is occupied with another group's instruction, which poses a management challenge for multi-graded teaching (Taole & Mncube, 2012). The lack of time is one of the main issues that teachers face when instructing multigrade classes (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). Lesson plans are created by teachers specifically for their classes. They must instruct kids in various grade levels, though. Therefore, it frequently results in incomplete lectures. To properly comprehend the teachings at each grade level, they require more time. It can be difficult for teachers to develop the skills of students who are in different grade levels. To enable students of various year levels, learn more effectively, they must effectively manage their time. Multigrade classrooms frequently lack organization, don't practice peer tutoring, and don't provide material in a logical order (Sampson & Condy, 2016).

Failing to consider the diversity of learners

Individual differences play a variety of roles in how students perform and behave during instruction. Gender, age, IQ, ability, interest, prior

knowledge, learning style, motivation, locus of control, self-efficacy, and epistemological views are the most typical differences across learners (Kuzgun and Deryakulu 2004). In multigrade classes, teachers frequently encounter issues with students' abilities, such as writing challenges and other academic issues (Blease & Condy, 2015). It can be difficult for teachers to develop the skills of students who are in different grade levels.

Inadequacy in Teaching Multiple Grades

These teachers weren't ready for the circumstance when they were employed and given multigrade classrooms to teach in. The experiences and opinions of teachers and subject-matter experts about teaching in multi-grade classes have been discussed by Bashiri Haddadan (2013). There are no specialized training programs for multi-grade classrooms, and the teachers lack experience of teaching strategies in these settings. Teachers' training should take into account the location and the conditions in which the teacher is expected to instruct (White & Reid, 2008). Many teachers lack the necessary training and are not familiar with the most recent methods and approaches for teaching (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Being a teacher of multiple grades presents both a difficulty and a chance for professional growth (Vasquez-Martinez et al., 2021). an educator's Teaching in multigrade classes requires professional development, knowledge, and abilities of all three types.

Experiencing burnout in teaching

Brown (2008) found that teaching several grades requires too much work from the teachers. This study suggests that multi-grade teaching requires greater planning and evaluation effort. Despite having a lot on their plates in the classroom, instructors also need to administrative tasks at the school. Teachers prefer single-grade classes to multi-grade ones, because multi-grade classes need more planning, organization, preparation, and work. In terms of preparation, instruction, and assessment, they were overworked. The teachers shared duties as full-time educators and handled administrative activities (Taole & Mncube, 2012; Gasa, 2016; Mulaudzi, 2016). The multi-grade teacher had to battle for his or her time and attention with such a variety of duties (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2019). They took on a variety of responsibilities, such as classroom teaching, sometimes spanning multiple grades, leading instruction and assessment in a range of subject areas, managing tight school budgets, fulfilling expanding fundamental accountability and reporting requirements, and building solid relationships with tight-knit communities. (OECD, 2019).

Multigrade Teachers Overcome Challenges

Multigrade instructors face these difficulties on a daily basis, but coping strategies have been developed to help them continue carrying out their obligations to provide their students with high-quality instruction. Table 2 shows the how the multigrade teachers overcome challenges encountered.

Question	Relevant Statements	F	Emerging Themes
How do you cope with the challenges you experienced?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being flexible • As teachers must develop flexible group practices and review the learning competencies and meet the needs of our learners. • I used to download from the internet for references • the teacher will be more resourceful, creative, imaginative and strategic in managing multi grade classes • Give them different activities according to their level. 	5	Teachers' Resourcefulness

Question	Relevant Statements	F	Emerging Themes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the needs of the learners well... (2) Learn about their culture Doing my responsibility to understand and teach them well. 	4	Understanding differences
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> following a timetable in doing duties and responsibilities (2) I am usually doing these works during my extra time sometimes rendering overtime at work 	3	Teachers' Resiliency
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By attending seminar on multi grade Attend seminars and trainings to enhance our skills on teaching multigrade 	2	Teachers' Innovativeness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... and assistance form coworkers and heads from time to time. Seeking recommendations from colleagues who have been teaching MG long enough to master the curriculum. Parent involvement in learners' development 	3	Support Group System
TOTAL		17	

As gleaned from the table, the multigrade teachers overcome challenges by teachers' resourcefulness, understanding differences, teachers' resiliency, dedicated to professional growth and support group system.

Teachers' Resourcefulness

Teachers used their creativity to overcome their obstacles. Given their situation, teachers need to be creative. Teachers had to create their own instructional materials due to a lack of resources and assistance (Taole, 2014). They frequently bring items they've gathered themselves. Even so, they spent their own money to purchase materials (Ngubane, 2011). To assist their pupils with their fundamental necessities, such as food, they worked along with other stakeholders. Additionally, they went to other MG schools in an effort to find best practices. These are a few examples of the inventiveness displayed by teachers. Using what is available and adapting to the situation, teachers in remote places are frequently quite resourceful (Cornish, 2010; Quejada, & Orale, 2018).

Understanding Differences

Far-flung teachers and leaders must develop communication skills with underrepresented or marginalized groups that may have

less power in the community, such as low-income families, indigenous children, and children of ethnic minorities (Jorgensen et al., 2010; Biddle et al., 2018). Schools in remote areas may be challenging to manage (OECD, 2019).

Teachers' Resiliency

Despite the difficulties, teachers persevered and kept their strength. The best teachers for them were their experiences. Despite the difficulties they faced, they keep developing and learning. They made every effort to complete challenging activities, and they sought to teach many grades while accomplishing learning goals (Taole, 2014). 2020 (Rafiq & Sultana). Multi-grade teachers can serve as role models for successful teaching through their pedagogical leadership attributes, resilience, and adaptability (Ramrathan and Ngubane, 2013).

Teachers' Innovativeness

Teachers' innovativeness was developed through multi-grade teaching. To address their particular circumstances, they must be creative. The teachers had to develop their own teaching and learning management techniques due to a lack of training in multi-grade teaching. They created their own plans of action that

were tailored to their circumstances (Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016; Brown, 2010). To stay up with the necessary personal and organizational changes, teachers must innovate and build their skills (Lecat et al. 2017; Arocena et al. 2007).

Support Group System

The definition of social assistance is the providing of useful assistance from friends, family members, and coworkers Bjrlkhaug and colleagues (2012). Similar to that, it is described as "support made provided to a person through social connections with others individuals, organizations, and the larger community

(Heaney and Israel, 2008). Resilience was strongly predicted by social support networks (Stewart & Yuen, 2011). Involvement with other instructors and exchanges among them are highlighted by the need for social support (Naparan, 2018).

Opportunities Experienced by the Teachers in Handling Multigrade Classes

As they enjoy their teaching career in multi-grade instruction, teachers have acknowledged rewarding exposure. Table 3 presents the opportunities experienced by the multigrade teachers.

Question	Relevant Statements	F	Emerging Themes
What are the opportunities you experienced in handling multi-grade classes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reward for us to become an effective teacher. fulfilling experience overwhelming but satisfying at the same time challenge (3) 	6	Enhancing the Self-Esteem of Teachers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> empower his colleagues and to develop and produce as well multi skilled 21st century learners flexible and resourceful (2) A motherly teacher, sometimes angry bird but at the end fair enough to understand them. guide and engage students service oriented, patience (2) 	7	Recognizes shared responsibility for facilitating student learning
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> adopt the lesson and willing to teach multigrade The ability to be adaptable and knowledgeable about various tactics. Multigrade teachers must be adaptable in order to tailor the curriculum to their multigrade classes. It is quite fascinating, as it opens an opportunity for me to learn more about teaching MG. 	4	Increasing the teaching proficiency of teachers
TOTAL		17	

As shown from the table there three (3) opportunities experienced by teachers in handling multi grade classes.

Enhancing the Self-Esteem of Teachers

Self-esteem can act as a fundamental psychological building block by a driver of involvement in academic work (Lim and Lee, 2017). The value of multi-grade teaching was acknowledged by teachers as a result of their experiences. The teacher's determination and

conviction that multi-grade instruction is valuable and the best way to ensure that everyone has access to an education will be crucial to the implementation of multi-grade instruction's success (Kivunja and Sims, 2018).

Recognizes Shared Responsibility for Facilitating Student Learning

According to McCollough and Gremler (1999), one of the most important aspects of education in the academic setting is the

coproduction of learning, which states that in order for students to learn, both the teacher and the student must work together (Chonko, 2003). In fact, students' intrinsic desire for learning can be increased by highly engaging instructors who use active-oriented learning assignments (Young, 2005). Additionally, dialogue interaction, a collaborative learning approach that is interactive, promotes learning and builds relationships of trust between participants (Ballantyne, 2004). Teachers can collaborate to exchange knowledge, critically evaluate their teaching approaches, offer peer or collegial support, and even develop teaching strategies together (Kelchtermans, 2006; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015).

Increasing the Teaching Proficiency of Teachers

Teaching across grade levels is an ongoing endeavor. The demands of multi-grade teachers in the teaching and learning process should be taken into account via induction, mentorship, and certification programs on multi-grade instruction. Academic institutions' training programs, which include mentoring and orientation before deployment, significantly aid in the delivery of multi-grade instruction (Brown, 2010). They must develop personal capabilities outside of the confines of the typical beginning and ongoing teacher education programs, which are designed for the traditional mono-grade classroom (Koulouris & Sotiriou, 2006). To ensure that they are supported in interpreting the curriculum, managing learning in special circumstances, implementing teaching innovations in the classroom, improving personal competences, and boosting their confidence as teachers in rural schools, teachers need to participate in in-service training workshops and collaborate with principals (Taole, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Joubert, 2010).

Proposed Enhancement Program

Following the generation of the results, a proposed enhancement program is made to further address the situation of multigrade teachers and improve the multigrade program in San Marcelino District (See Appendix D).

Conclusions

Based on the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn: 1. The challenges encountered by multigrade teachers in far-flung schools are difficulty in handling classroom and time management, failing to consider the diversity of learners, inadequacy in teaching multiple grades and experiencing burnout in teaching. 2. Multigrade teachers overcome challenges encountered through teachers' resourcefulness, understanding differences, teachers' resiliency, teachers' innovativeness, and support group system. Students use reappraising and evading as their boredom-coping strategies in Social Studies discussions. 3. The opportunities experienced by the multigrade teachers are enhancing the self-esteem of teachers, recognizing shared responsibility for facilitating student learning and increasing the teaching proficiency of teachers. 4. An enhancement program was proposed to reiterate the unwavering commitment to tackling problems with educational access and quality through research-based policies, as well as the value of collaboration and partnership, in order to equip multigrade teachers in teaching multi-grade classes.

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