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Research Article

Multi-Grade Teaching: Experiences of Elementary Teachers of Zone 2, DepEd Division of Zambales, Philippines

Wilbert B. Fronda^{1*}, Marie Fe D. De Guzman², Leila L. Ravana²

¹Belbel Elementary School, Belbel, Botolan, Zambales, Philippines

²President Ramon Magsaysay State University, Iba Zambales, Philippines

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

wilbert.fronda@deped.gov.ph

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to deeply understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales, Philippines. Employing a qualitative, phenomenological research design, the methodology involved in-depth interviews and observations with 15 purposively sampled multigrade teachers from Botolan and Palauig Districts. Data analysis was systematically conducted using Braun & Clarke's six-step thematic process. Key findings revealed that multigrade teaching is both highly demanding and deeply fulfilling. Teachers face significant challenges, including adapting to diverse learners and curricula, managing limited resources, and handling intensive planning and workload, often leading to emotional strain. Despite this, they derive sense of satisfaction from witnessing student growth, fostering strong learning communities, and experiencing personal and professional transformation. Teachers employ multifaceted coping strategies such as determination, proactive approaches, for instance differentiated instruction; and building supportive classroom communities. The study concludes that these educators exhibit remarkable resilience and ingenuity, and their effectiveness hinges on a robust, interconnected support system encompassing specialized professional development, adequate resources, and comprehensive collaborative and administrative backing.

Keywords: *Elementary Teachers, Multigrade, Lived Experiences, Challenges, Rewards, Coping Strategies, Professional Support*

Introduction

The Global Education Monitoring Report, 2024/5, *Leadership in Education: Lead for Learning* (2024), revealed that despite progress in widening access to education, 251 million children are still out of school. Highlighting

that the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Quality Education, necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the diverse educational contexts in which learning occurs. Multigrade classrooms, where a single teacher instructs students across multiple grade levels

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simultaneously, are prevalent in various educational settings, especially in rural or resource-limited areas. Teachers in these environments encounter unique challenges and opportunities that differ significantly from single-grade classrooms. This type of learning is more common in developing countries (Bajpai & Pandey, 2023), as they view multigrade classrooms as an alternative pedagogical context for teacher development, (İşler, 2022).

Teachers' experiences in multigrade classrooms vary, with some finding success through commitment and recognizing the value of this teaching approach, while others struggle with feelings of inadequacy and burnout (Montalbo, et. al., 2021). For instance, teachers in multigrade classrooms face challenges in planning, instruction, classroom management, and administrative duties (Kalender & Erdem, 2021). Similarly, Ahmadifar & Faragian (2024) identified significant challenges, including time management issues due to the extensive curriculum and students' bilingualism.

Likewise, Naparan & Castañeda (2021) identified inadequate preparation, limited financial support, high stress levels, communication barriers, and insufficient resources, which underscore the critical need for improved support systems and professional development opportunities to empower teachers in effectively addressing the unique demands of multigrade education. Additionally, Castigador (2019) revealed common themes among teachers, such as feelings of uncertainty and the need for flexibility in handling multiple grade levels. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the personal and professional challenges faced by multigrade teachers.

The Multigrade Education Program (MEP) was implemented in the Philippines through DepEd Order No. 96, s. 1997, which outlines the policies and guidelines for organizing and operating Multigrade (MG) Classes in the Philippines, (Department of Education, 1997). It's primarily implemented in remote and underserved areas where there is a shortage of teachers and limited resources. Relatively, Tayoni & Aboejo (2023), conducted a Policy evaluation on MEP, their results indicate that while teachers effectively manage multigrade classes with smaller student populations, several challenges

hinder the optimal implementation of the Multigrade Education Program (MEP). These challenges included inadequate learning materials, limited teacher training, and insufficient parental involvement. Despite these challenges, the MEP fosters positive outcomes in students, including improved study habits, responsibility, and cooperation. In essence, the program's success hinges on a multi-pronged approach: well-trained teachers, appropriate resources, active parental engagement, and strong support from school administrators. While general challenges are identified, there is a need for more context-specific research that explores the unique challenges faced by multigrade teachers in specific regions or communities within the Philippines. There is a need for more comprehensive studies that capture the emotional and psychological impact of these challenges.

The main goal of the study was to have an in-depth understanding of the Multigrade Teachers' perspectives, challenges, and successes in managing diverse learning needs within a single classroom. The study aimed to contribute to a more informed and effective approach to multigrade education, ultimately improving the learning experiences and outcomes for students in these settings. Thus, this study is motivated that exploring the lived experiences of Multigrade teachers is crucial for developing effective support systems, training programs, and policies that address their specific needs. By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges they face, educational stakeholders can enhance teaching efficacy and improve student outcomes in multigrade settings.

Research Questions

The research provided valuable insights into the complexities of multigrade education by exploring the lived experiences of Multigrade Teachers of selected elementary schools in Zone 2, Division of Zambales. Hence, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of elementary teachers in multigrade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales?
2. How do these teachers perceive the rewards of teaching in a multi-grade setting?

3. How do these teachers perceive the challenges of teaching in a multi-grade setting?
4. What are the coping strategies employed by these teachers to effectively address the unique demands of multi-grade teaching?
5. What kinds of professional support did the participants need to be effective in a multi-grade setting?
6. How do the teachers' experiences in multi-grade classrooms impact their professional development and well-being?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two theories; Teacher Efficacy and Resilience Theory, as the basic foundation of the present study. The researcher believed that these theories directly address two crucial aspects of successful teaching in challenging contexts. Teacher Efficacy Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, posits that teachers' beliefs in their ability to positively influence student learning significantly impact their teaching practices and ultimately student achievement (Iliev, 2024). Teacher Efficacy Theory highlights the importance of teachers' self-beliefs in their ability to effectively teach. This is particularly relevant in MG classrooms where teachers face unique challenges in meeting the diverse needs of multiple age groups. Resilience refers to the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and even thrive in the face of adversity (Métais, et al., 2022). In the context of MG teaching, it encompasses the teacher's ability to cope with challenges, maintain a positive outlook, find creative solutions, and learn from experience. Resilience theory helps understand how teachers navigate the complexities of multigrade teaching, such as time constraints, limited resources, and the emotional demands of managing multiple grade levels. Teacher efficacy and resilience are interconnected. Teachers with higher efficacy are more likely to be resilient, as they believe in their ability to overcome challenges. Conversely, successful experiences of overcoming adversity can strengthen both resilience and efficacy.

Methods

The study aimed to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers in multi-

grade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales, Philippines. This aligned perfectly with the core principles of qualitative research, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA approach delves into personal lived experiences and how individuals make sense of their experiences and involvement. Qualitative research was a naturalistic, interpretive approach to scientific inquiry that focused on understanding human experiences, beliefs, and behaviors through non-numerical data. Phenomenology was particularly appropriate for exploring occurrences that were deeply personal and subjective, such as emotions, beliefs, and interpretations. This research method was rooted from the work of Edmund Husserl, it aimed to understand the unique meanings of phenomena as consciously perceived by people (Hasan, 2023). In the context of this study, it allowed the researchers to delve into the teachers' unique perspectives, emotions, and interpretations of their daily realities. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, potentially supplemented by observations or other qualitative methods. The findings of the phenomenological study could be used to inform the development of a practical resource guide for teachers.

The target population for the study was the elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms within Zone 2, Division of Zambales. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the focus on in-depth understanding of individual experiences, the purposive sampling technique was used in identifying the participants of the study. Purposive sampling was a non-probability sampling technique used to select participants based on specific criteria to enhance data quality and relevance in qualitative research. Hence, the inclusion criteria for participants in this study were: (1) must be currently employed as an elementary school teacher in the Division of Zambales; (2) must have at least two (2) years of teaching experience in a multi-grade classroom setting; and (3) must be willing to participate in in-depth interviews and provide informed consent. The study was conducted at elementary schools with multi-grade settings of the three (3) Districts (Botolan District, Iba District and Palauig District) of Zone 2,

DepEd Division of Zambales. Due to the absence of multigrade elementary schools in the town of Iba, the target schools for this study came from Botolan and Palauig Districts only. In this study the schools included in Botolan District were: Nacolcol Integrated School; Owaog Elementary School; Dojoc Balete Integrated School, Villar Integrated School, Parel Elementary School, San Miguel Elementary School, and Alao Elementary School. Magalawa Elementary School and Sta. Martha Elementary School are located at Palauig, Zambales.

To understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms, in-depth interviews and observations were the primary instruments used for data collection. This guide included open-ended questions that encouraged teachers to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words, and follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific topics and clarify responses. The combination of interviews and observations strengthened the study by providing both subjective accounts and observable behaviors related to the phenomenon of multigrade teaching.

According to McMillan & Schumacher (2014), qualitative phases of data collection and analysis are intertwined and occurred in overlapping cycles, rather than as distinct procedures. These phases should be viewed as strategies, or techniques, that depended on each prior strategy and the resulting data. Data gathering began from April to May, 2025. The phase started from carefully examining and formulating clear research questions that guided the entire research process. Second phase marked the initial entry into the field and focused on establishing rapport and building trust with participants. Phase three involved in-depth data collection and preliminary analysis. In phase four, the researchers continued interviewing teachers until data saturation was reached. In phase five, the researchers thoroughly analyzed the interview transcripts. This involved thematic analysis.

Safeguarding participant rights by upholding principles of anonymity, voluntary participation, privacy, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point, was the main responsibility of the researcher. First, the

researchers submitted the research proposal for ethical review and approval before commencing any data collection activities. After which, the researcher secured a permit approved by the SDS DepEd Division of Zambales. Second, the researchers provided potential participants with comprehensive information about the study and obtained a written informed consent from each participant before the activity began. Third, the researchers ensured to secure storage of all collected data to protect participant confidentiality and used pseudonyms or codes to protect their anonymity. Additionally, the researchers ensured that participation was entirely voluntary and can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Interviews were also done at the convenience of the participants, with respect and courtesy throughout the research process.

The researchers used the thematic analysis following the six-step process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2013). The method typically followed six key steps: familiarizing with data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Fuchs, 2023). The data analysis involved an immersive process aimed to develop a deep and nuanced understanding of the data. In the coding phase, researchers created succinct and meaningful codes to capture significant features of the teachers' narratives. In the searching for themes, the researchers identified coherent patterns and connections among the generated codes. All coded data relevant to each identified theme were collated. The researchers reviewed the themes, involved a critical assessment of the identified themes. This may involve refining themes, merging similar themes, splitting broad themes into sub-themes, or discarding themes that did not adequately represent the data. Once the themes were refined, the researcher conducted a detailed analysis of each theme, determining its core essence and significance within the context of teaching in multi-grade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales. This provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, rewards, and unique contributions of teachers in multigrade classrooms in this specific context.

Results and Discussion

Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in the Multi-grade Classrooms of Zone 2, Division of Zambales, Philippines

Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Multi-grade Classrooms

Q1. What are the experiences of elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales?

The experiences of elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms in Zone 2, Division of Zambales, are characterized by a unique blend of significant challenges and profound fulfillment. The thematic analysis, supported by verbatim accounts from teachers, highlights their resilience, adaptability, and innovative approaches to education. Teachers frequently grapple with the need to adjust to diverse learners and curricula, where they must differentiate instruction to cater to multiple grade levels and varying learning styles within a single classroom. They have shared:

"So sa pagiging educator masasabi ko talagang 'yung experience as in roller coaster pagdating sa emotions, roller coaster pagdating sa adaptations o 'yung coping up sa pagtuturo especially here in an eastern school, kung saan ang mga bata very diverse" (P1). "One of the biggest challenges in MG teaching is differentiating instruction. Unlike a traditional, MG classrooms require the teacher to cater to the diverse learning" (P2). "As an Ayta, I understand firsthand the challenges of Indigenous learners. I was assigned to Nacolcol Integrated School - the farthest school in Botolan, Zambales. It takes 12 hours by foot to reach, crossing lahar areas and mountain trails. There's no internet, no cell signal, and the only transportation is by habal-habal, kulong, or, during rainy seasons, a cart pulled by a carabao" (P5).

They customize lesson plans and activities to meet the distinct curriculum requirements of each grade level while fostering a collaborative learning environment where older students can mentor younger ones (Sitabkhan, et al., 2022). Noted in the present study that

teachers often experience increased workload and stress due to the constant need for curriculum adjustments and material preparation for multiple grades. This is further compounded by resource constraints, particularly in remote areas where access to teaching materials, technology, and basic infrastructure is limited.

"In a place with no internet or access to visual materials, every learning gain feels like a miracle" (P7). "The daily rhythms and routines are shaped by the context: limited resources, diverse learning needs, and a strong emphasis on cultural preservation." (P9). "I have experienced a lot of adjustment, balancing different or multiple curricula, flexible grouping, managing classroom dynamics and also resource allocation" (P14)

The task of teaching is more difficult because there are few relevant materials available. Consequently, teachers must engage in intensive planning and management, meticulously organizing lessons, managing time effectively, and handling multiple subjects simultaneously.

"A typical day in multigrade classroom involves juggling multiple grade level simultaneously starting with whole group activities" (P14). "You're juggling different grade levels, multiple lesson plans, and diverse learning needs all within the same classroom and time frame. It demands a high level of organization, patience, and adaptability" (P2).

These results were aligned with Jabiñar (2024), revealing that teachers face difficulties adapting to diverse learners and curricula, often experiencing stress and language barriers. Naparan & Castañeda (2021), added unpreparedness, lack of resources, and classroom management struggles among these challenges for effectiveness of MG instructions. Despite these considerable hurdles, the teachers experienced the profound rewards and fulfillment in multi-grade teaching. Teachers express immense satisfaction from witnessing student growth and independence.

"I witnessed students grow not only academically but also emotionally and socially. I'm a transformed flexible, creative and compassionate teacher" (P12). "You witness older students becoming mentors and younger ones growing in confidence as they learn side by side" (P2). "My most cherished memory or experience in teaching is witnessing my first-class graduate in 2018. Successfully guiding my first batch of learners to high school was immensely rewarding" (P4)

In the Philippines, teachers are accustomed to teaching multigrade classes; acknowledging their roles; and continuously engaging in learning (Castigador, 2024). The participants of the present study find it particularly gratifying to see older students' mentor younger ones and observe the overall academic, social, and emotional development of their learners in a collaborative setting: *"It made the classroom feel like a close-knit community" (P13). "I feel proud watching that everyone moves at their own pace. Their energy reminds me that learning is also about curiosity and joy. This environment feels like a true learning community" (P6).*

Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging in classrooms is crucial for student success and engagement and can contribute to knowledge building (Penuel, et al., 2022). This unique environment fosters a strong sense learning community where close, family-like relationships are nurtured between students and with the teachers. Moreover, the demanding nature of the role often leads to significant personal and professional transformation, pushing teachers to become more resilient, resourceful, and innovative in their pedagogical approaches. They quoted: *"The journey of being an educator is a deeply transformative and rewarding one" (P15). "Teaching multigrade is very challenging but fun. Challenging because of handling two grade level at a time is not an easy thing. But teaching multi-grade classroom challenged me to become more innovative and productive" (P12).*

Differentiated classrooms are more effective in accommodating diverse learners

compared to standardized settings, and positively impacts student achievement and participation in the learning process (Aysha, 2023). Promoting peer learning and collaboration is also central, with older students often taking on mentorship roles for younger learners, fostering a supportive and cooperative classroom environment. *"Peer tutoring also plays a role here older or more advanced learners help others review past lessons" (P3). "I group students by level, while others work independently or with a buddy." (P6)*

It could be concluded that a positive environment with supportive peers can foster learning and growth. Finally, establishing structured daily routines, including consistent morning activities, and reflection time, helps manage the diverse and organized learning space. According to Carvalho & Santos (2021), collaborative approaches enhance students' metacognitive awareness, communication skills, and teamwork abilities. *"It begins with welcoming the pupils with smiles and creating warm environment, 'Kamustahan', then a prayer, checking attendance. I usually start with a whole-group activity like a song/reading words storytelling/game to set the tone for the day. Then, shift into differentiated instruction/deliveries while one grade level assigned a task(seatwork) and vice versa" (P11)*

Recurring classroom activities and daily routines play a significant role in student engagement and learning. Research shows that established routines can help develop interactional competence in second language learners. These routines help students build self-discipline, problem-solving skills, and critical-thinking abilities. The experiences of teacher-participants showed professionalism who, despite facing significant and varied challenges, find deep satisfaction in fostering a vibrant, collaborative, and transformative learning environment for their diverse student population.

Perception of Rewards in Teaching Multi-grade Classes

Q2: How do these teachers perceive the rewards of teaching in a multigrade setting?

The teachers perceive the rewards of teaching in a multi-grade setting primarily through

the lens of student growth, evident through their academic progress and personal and character development within such classrooms:

"My learners confidently presented a traditional dance and song during our school program. Community elders watched with pride. It was cultural preservation. I'm overwhelmed with happiness and pride" (P5). "An experience of joy as MG teacher was during the year-end assessment. My student who started the school year as a non-reader, read the words slowly. I felt fulfilled with joy from this moment" (P11). "Witnessing my students academic achievements fill me with immense pride and reinforces my commitment to teaching". (P4)

Teachers find rewards in their students' academic and personal growth, despite the challenges in multigrade settings (Medequillo & Gallardo, 2024). Teaching in multigrade classes offers significant satisfaction and a stronger sense of belonging for educators, especially when they instruction that fosters students' holistic development. Teachers' supports significantly correlates with improved student performance, motivation, and interpersonal skills:

"Seeing my students/learners grow and succeed is what makes teaching so rewarding, and moments like these make all the challenges worth it" (P7). "Perseverance and a supportive classroom really make a difference. The power of education and the meaningful connections we build with our students are vital". (P6). "I hoped this classroom could be a place where age didn't limit learning where students grow not just academically but as people and where they lift each other up". (P13)

Internal motivations, such as personal interests and a desire to work with children, significantly shape teachers' satisfaction with their profession (Nowosad, 2023). For the participants of the present study, the academic achievement of the students, reinforces their commitment to teaching. Moreover, a unique and highly rewarding aspect of MG teaching is the development of a strong, supportive

community among students of different ages. Teachers observe older students naturally stepping into mentoring roles, helping younger peers with their learning and building strong bonds:

"I feel a deep sense of satisfaction or joy in multigrade class. I see students help each other; older students mentor younger ones and see them working together is rewarding" (P10). "The joy was shared by all the students, reinforcing the collaborative spirit of the multigrade classroom" (P9). "Older students naturally step up to help younger ones. I see them form bonds across age groups that might not happen elsewhere" (P2)

Multi-grade learning environments foster peer learning, collaboration, and leadership skills development (Coria-Navia, et al., 2022). These experiences profoundly shape teachers' sense of purpose. The teacher participants find deep satisfaction in nurturing individual growth and empowering students to reach their full potential, viewing their role as more than just delivering a curriculum but as fostering a supportive learning environment: *"Creating a sense of community can feel like a family with students supporting and learning from each other". (P10). "The most rewarding aspect was when there's a pupil/s break their fear and build confidence because they learned and it shape me as an effective MG teacher. (P11)"*

A strong sense of purpose for teachers is to find meaning in their work and achieve professional goals (Fussy, 2023). Resilience is positively associated with well-being, job engagement, and self-efficacy (Lavy, 2022). The ability to form deeper, more lasting connections with students over multiple years of teaching also contributes to this sense of fulfillment of the participants of the present study. The challenges of multi-grade setting are often outweighed by the rewards and fulfillment of seeing students' flourish. The participants showed resilience towards their profession. *"It was a powerful reminder of why I chose this profession the transformative potential of education and the profound connection that can be forged with*

students" (P9). "Helping them believe in their potentials gives me sense of purpose" (P6). "It shapes my sense of purpose as a teacher; every learner is unique and deserves support" (P7). "Becoming a teacher is one of the most rewarding and personally satisfying yet most challenging life work" (P8).

Deep connections and relationships with students and colleagues are crucial for a teacher's sense of purpose and meaning as perceived by the teacher participants. They act as a powerful anchor that keeps educators motivated and resilient, especially when facing the challenges of the profession.

"You develop a deep affection; their growth and progress become a source of happiness and motivation". (P10). "MG allows deeper connections, trust and understanding. This helps me better support their academic and emotional growth". (P12)

The rewards of teaching in a multigrade setting, as perceived by these educators, are deeply rooted in the profound impact they have on student growth, the unique and supportive community they foster, and the resulting sense of personal and professional fulfillment that transcends the inherent challenges of this educational environment.

Perception of Challenges in Teaching Multi-grade Classes

Q3. How do these teachers perceive the challenges of teaching in a multi-grade setting?

The teachers reported facing managing diverse learning environments, resource and time constraints, classroom and instructional management, and emotional and professional toll, in a multigrade classroom. Teachers grapple with differentiated instruction and curriculum, involves constantly adjusting content and activities, and what suits a group may not be appropriate for another:

"Differentiating instruction for various grade levels and learning styles and implementing the curriculum are some of the obstacles in providing effective instruction in this kind of classroom setting"

(P2). "Managing diverse learning needs and levels simultaneously, is the biggest obstacle" (P12). "Each grade has its own learning standards, pacing and skill, yet I have to teach them in the same space and time. I am constantly adjusting content, activities, and expectations" (P13).

Differentiated instruction has emerged as an effective approach to meet diverse learning requirements (Koimah et al., 2024); however, addressing varied student needs and abilities in education presents significant challenges (Blaz, 2023). Furthermore, addressing varied student needs and abilities is a significant hurdle, particularly when some learners struggle with basic skills like reading and comprehension, while others are more advanced. Creating lessons that cater to diverse learning styles and experiences, presents a core difficulty in providing effective instruction to all. They quoted:

"A significant challenge to effective instruction was some of my learners can't read and comprehend my lessons" (P4). "Balancing the needs of some learners who require support with those who are advanced and accelerated" (P7). "The student diversities makes it challenging to create lessons that cater to everyone" (P10). "The biggest obstacle in providing effective instruction to all students" (P15). "The rest of the class grew restless; I try to be everywhere at once" (P6)

Teachers face challenges in balancing support for struggling students while engaging advanced learners (Sefain, 2025). Hence, teachers face practical classroom limitations. Insufficient resources and materials are consistently cited, including a lack of multi-grade-appropriate resources, absence of internet access, and inadequate support staff. These limitations significantly impede the delivery of high-quality instruction, moreover, teachers find themselves mentally and physically exhausted:

"Having limited resources and materials and classroom time management are some of the obstacles in this setting" (P2). "Teaching while other group is learning, the others must stay independently" (P3).

"The biggest is absence of internet" (P5). "Tough, not having enough materials, technology or support staff" (P10). "Some of my biggest obstacles encountered are insufficient preparation time" (P4). "Preparing multiple lessons, encouraging learners and juggling tasks are mentally and physically exhausting" (P3).

Time management is a key challenge but also a crucial coping strategy for multi-grade teachers facing various challenges (Naparán & Castañeda, 2021; and Rondero & Casupanan, 2024). The issue of time constraint is a significant and widely recognized challenge for teachers in multigrade classrooms. Teaching multiple grade levels at once means a teacher must manage a more complex workload: *"Time management is crucial. You have to allocate time for each grade level and make sure everyone gets attention and keep the class flowing smoothly" (P10, P7).*

Effective curriculum management is crucial for success in multi-grade classrooms, requiring community support, differentiated instruction, and flexible planning (Mampane & Carrim, 2024). This further implicates the difficulties of maintaining an effective learning environment. Maintaining engagement and behavior is a continuous challenge, as teachers must constantly adapt to the varying energy levels and attention spans of students across different ages and developmental stages.

"Managing a classroom with students of different ages. Their energy levels and attention spans vary so much, and it takes constant adjusting to keep things on track" (P6) "Having students of different developmental stages requires strong classroom management skills" (P9). "Managing classroom behavior, noise levels and disruptions can be a significant obstacle to effective instruction" (P10).

Maintaining student engagement and attention in the classroom is a continuous challenge for teachers (Oliveira & Lathrop, 2022). An effective teaching process is built upon a foundation of thorough planning and active student engagement (Dursun & Aykan, 2025). Teachers

struggle with the complexity of designing meaningful, engaging, and level-appropriate activities for multi-grades:

"Difficulty designing and creating activities" (P8). "Creating meaningful engaging and level-appropriate activities for each grade within the same subject and time" (P13). "Some of the most challenging aspects in a multigrade classroom are time management and lesson planning" (P14).

Effective classroom management is crucial for creating a smooth and productive learning environment in multigrade classrooms (Sercola, 2024). The quality of multigrade education heavily depends on teachers' professional skills and attitudes. Feelings of being overwhelmed are prevalent, stemming from the complexity of lesson planning, the need to multitask, and juggling numerous responsibilities. These obstacles often lead to feelings of frustration and inadequacy:

"Preparing multiple lessons encouraging no learner is left behind, and juggling everything on my own can be mentally and physically exhausting" (P3). "It can be overwhelming at times. I was frustrated, overwhelmed" (P6). "Burn out. Teaching is one of the most demanding profession out there" (P8). "Obstacles often lead to feelings of being overwhelmed" (P9). "Teaching MG makes me feel overwhelmed, e.g., lesson planning, and multitask everything" (P2, P12).

Among other things, teachers struggle with classroom management, workload, and lack of stakeholder support (Naparán & Castañeda, 2021). Without adequate support, multigrade teachers might find it difficult to provide instruction to the diverse needs of their students (Dontogan, et al., 2024). Teachers experience professional isolation and lack of support. The absence of sufficient materials, technology, or support staff contributes to the struggle of delivering high-quality instruction:

"There are no assistant teachers, so managing time is always a struggle" (P5). "Providing effective instruction can be tough and the biggest obstacles encounter

teachers faces are not having enough materials, technology or support staff that can make hard to deliver high quality instruction" (P10).

Teachers in multi-grade frequently express feelings of overwhelmed and stressed by the complexity of managing diverse learning needs and the constant need to multitask. They also experience frustration and inadequacy when facing insufficient resources, time constraints, and difficulties in providing equal attention to all students. A sense of professional isolation was manifested through lack of support staff and specific multigrade resources. These challenges contribute to a demanding environment that can be mentally and physically exhausting.

Coping Strategies of Multi-grade Teachers

Q4. What are the coping strategies employed by these teachers to effectively address the unique demands of multi-grade teaching?

Beyond immediate reactions, teachers also engage in reflection and positive self-talk, viewing difficulties as opportunities for learning and adjustment rather than dwelling on setbacks. This mindset, often reinforced by personal affirmations and prayer, fuels perseverance and maintains motivation:

"First of all, be calm. Yes, kailangan talaga lagi kang kalmado. Kasi kapag kalamdo ka magkakaroon ng clarity yung isip mo, makakapagisip ka" (P1). "I try to stay calm and think clearly" (P3). "When facing challenges, I focus on positive aspects because it attracts confidence and motivation" (P4, P12). "Breathe, pray, and reflect on my mission. I will not give up now" (P5, P13). "I relax myself, give time to breath and be with my family. I need to balance my strength and prioritie self-care" (P12). "Reflect and Adapt instead of dwelling on what didn't go well" (P2).

Emotional and mental fortitude are important for effective multi-grade teaching, as teachers experience both successes and challenges in this context, (Montalbo, et al., 2021). Maintaining calmness and self-care practices

among teachers can positively impact student learning, (Pelton, 2023).

Differentiated Instruction (DI), as such, proactive instructional approaches are central to managing the diverse needs of students across multiple grade levels. According to Blaz (2023), this approach considers factors like culture, socioeconomic status, language, and personal interests when developing curriculum and assessment measures. The participant of the present study advocates this approach to multi grade teaching: *"What works best for me is using differentiated instruction things like flexible groups, choice boards, and learning centers" (P6). "Differentiated instruction shape teaching to meet the diverse needs, personalized learning experiences" (P10). "Flexible grouping helps me and my learners in different ways to facilitate learning and collaboration." (P7)*

Teachers of the present study acknowledge planning, organization, and time management. They apply these in lesson planning, routines, and learning activities. The goal is to maximize instructional time and foster student independence through predictable daily routines and efficient transitions. Effective strategies include goal setting, planning, prioritization, and leveraging digital tools. According to Naparan & Castañeda (2021), the implementation of such strategies takes time, hence, the teachers implemented time management techniques.

"I navigate the challenges of teaching in a multigrade classroom being strategic with time, because time is always limited, so I focus on making the most of each block" (P13, 14, 15). "Careful planning of lesson; practice of time management; fostering classroom community; and providing positive reinforcement" (P9, P8, P1). "I stay organized with color-coded plans, visual schedules, and staggered activities, often using tech to help." (P6, P2)"

Establishing strong teacher-student rapport is crucial, as it significantly predicts students' active participation in class (Bardorfer, 2024) and increase academic confidence and emotional intelligence (Hengki & Ratna, 2025). Building a supportive environment is another

crucial coping mechanism. Teachers prioritize fostering rapport and connection with students. A strong bond with learners is fundamental for effective teaching and engagement. This involves understanding individual needs and interests, and showing empathy. *"Rapport, trust and to build a connection with your pupils/learners. Kasi kung walang rapport, hindi mo kakayanin" (P1). "I always prioritize building strong relationships with my learners, understanding their needs and interests; and be flexible and adaptable in approaches" (P7).*

Community building and collaboration are emphasized, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and mutual support within the classroom through peer tutoring, positive reinforcement, and collaborative projects. Connections with colleagues and parents also form a vital part of this supportive network: *"Building a supportive classroom community is also huge, with peer tutoring, positive reinforcement, and shared responsibilities like classroom jobs" (P6). "Strong community connections (colleagues, parents)" (P6, P9). "If necessary, I'll reach out for extra help" (P6).*

It could be a way of self-care and well-being which are recognized as essential for long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Teachers engage in various self-care routines, including adequate sleep, proper diet, exercise, mindfulness, and simply taking time to rest and breathe when overwhelmed: *"I take care of both my mind and heart. I try to balance my time, rest when I'm tired and breathe when I feel overwhelmed. Just simple self-care" (P3). "Maintaining well-being involves prioritizing self-care (sleep, diet, exercise)" (P6, P9). "To maintain well-being should focus on effective time management, establishing clear boundaries and prioritize self-care" (P14, P15, P10)*

The coping strategies employed by teachers in multi-grade classrooms are multifaceted, encompassing emotional resilience, pedagogical adaptability, community building, and personal well-being. Teachers emphasize the critical need to maintain calmness and clarity of thought, especially when faced with unexpected challenges.

Professional Support Needed by the Teachers to be Effective in a Multi-grade Setting

Q5. What kinds of professional support did the participants need to be effective in a multi-grade setting?

Teachers often lack specialized training in multi-grade pedagogy, leading to difficulties in curriculum implementation and potential learning gaps for students (Jakachira & Muchabaiwa, 2023). Professional development is crucial for effective multigrade teaching (Montalbo et al., 2021). Teachers of the present study need support in specialized training programs and resources, professional growth opportunities, multigrade-specific and assessment strategies: *"Training programs focused on mg teaching methodologies classroom management, differentiated instruction, assessment strategies are crucial for building teacher confidence and competence" (P15). "Supported w/ teaching materials, lesson plans, differentiated instruction materials and of course a training for untrained MG teachers" (P11).*

One participant highlighted the challenge of attending seminars designed for single-grade levels when teaching a multi-grade class, emphasizing the need for innovation and more time dedicated to multigrade training. Studies emphasize the need for tailored support from education officials and administrators to enhance teacher training and resource provision (Medequillo & Gallardo, 2024):

"I innovate. Kasi syempre, bago naman ng curriculum natin. So pag sinabing multigrade dalawa kaagad. Kung titignan mo, multigrade and hawak ko, 5 and 6 tapos mono lang. Ang grade 5 naka exemplar na and grade 6 hindi pa. Eh paano ako, mahihirapan ako" (P1)

A recurring theme is the critical need for sufficient and appropriate resources. This includes a wide array of diverse learning materials, school supplies, and even technology like computers and interactive whiteboards. Participants noted that teaching in a multi-grade setting necessitates adequate provisions, for instance, contextualized materials aligned with IPs Education and multi-grade teaching.

Access to various reading levels, math manipulatives, and hands-on learning experiences can meet the diverse needs of students" (P2). Kailangan syempre sana naman mapunan dapat yung lahat ng materials or school supplies na kailangan when it come to teaching multigrade (P1)"

The multi-grade strategies in teacher education programs are recommended to better equip educators in this unique environment. Contextualized strategies, have been found to improve the learning process for Indigenous learners (Pedroso, et al., 2023). Community support plays a significant role in influencing teaching strategies in multigrade Indigenous schools (Olana & Paglinawan, 2025).

Beyond tangible resources (e.g., technology) and training, participants underscored the importance of a supportive network of colleagues and heads. There is a need for more personalized and adapted teaching materials that respond to the specific needs of rural students in multigrade settings (Carrete-Marín & Domingo-Peñañiel, 2022). Furthermore, having dedicated support staff, impact teachers' ability to manage increased workload and provide individualized attention:

"my support system includes my coteachers, school head, family who share ideas and simple advice during tough days" (P3, P7, P8). "My support system includes support from colleagues and the school head, particularly for students struggling with reading and numbers" (P4). "Technology can be a powerful tool for supporting multi-grade instruction" (P2). "Administrators who understand the unique complexities of teaching multiple grade levels simultaneously, providing specialized professional development, curriculum materials that works across grade level" (P14)

Peer mentorship is valuable for developing leadership qualities and addressing administrative pressures through inclusive practices that promote diversity and equity (Friedman, et al., 2021). Mentorship and opportunities for peer collaboration are highly valued, allowing multigrade teachers to share ideas, best

practices, and problem-solve. It can provide valuable emotional and logistical support. Participants in the present study expressed a desire for administrators to proactively identify and address individual student needs and acknowledged their efforts and skills:

"Support most helpfu lin navigating the unique demands of my multigrade classroom like professional development opportunities; peer support and collaboration; mentorship" (P7). "Collaborative planning time and mentorship,with other multigrade teachers is also minimal, limiting opportunities to share best practices and problem-solve collectively" (P9).

Some teachers, especially those in remote areas, feel 'forgotten in the mountains' due to very little feedback or provision for their specific realities. The need for consistent feedback and technical assistance from superiors was also highlighted: *"Finally, while there's an understanding of the increased workload, there isn't a commensurate level of recognition or acknowledgment of the extra effort and skill required for effective multigrade teaching." (P9, P13, P5).*

These collaborative efforts aim to create inclusive learning environments and address the unique challenges of multi-grade education. In conclusion, the effectiveness of multigrade teachers hinges upon a support system that includes specialized professional development, ample and appropriate resources, and a strong, understanding, and collaborative administrative and peer network.

Impact of Teachers' Experiences in Multi-grade Classrooms to Their Professional Development and Well-being

Q6. How do the teachers' experiences in Multi-grade classrooms impact their professional development and well-being?

The experiences (interplay of challenges and fulfillment) of teachers in multi-grade classrooms significantly impact both their professional development and well-being; and experience of stress and exhaustion. The increased workload led to feelings of overwhelm, pressure and mental fatigue.

" Stressed to the max talaga to the point na maiiyak ka na- lang kasi ang hirap e" (P1, P5, P9). "Teaching in a multi-grade class affects emotional, psychological and well-being of a teacher. For instance, stress and burnout to manage a diverse learners" (P2, P7, P12, P13). "Lalo na sa preparation? Kailangan matuto kang mag adjust, kailangan alam mong ibagay yung sarili mo, kailangan alam mong imove yung sarili mo na para kang tau tauhan na ano" (P1, P11)

While professionally enriching, multi-grade teaching can have a significant and often dual impact on a teacher's well-being, encompassing both stressors and profound satisfactions. This is crucial for navigating the varied learning paces and needs within a single classroom, leading to challenges and rewards. Teachers are compelled to think outside the box and develop innovative strategies, leading to a more creative and resourceful approach to teaching.

"Increased my flexibility, adaptability and resourcefulness" (P2, P3, P11). "This experience has deepened my understanding of the importance of differentiated instruction and learning taught me to be more flexible and adaptable in my teaching approach" (P7, P9, P8). "It shapes me into a flexible, innovative educator" (P12, P13, P14, P15).

Multi-grade teaching presents unique challenges and opportunities for professional development (Mampane & Carrim, 2024). Professional development pathways for multi-grade teachers should include continuous training, from teacher preparation to in-service support (Bashir, et al., 2024). These efforts can enhance the quality of education in MG and promote teacher professional growth:

"Experience taught me how enhanced creativity in lesson planning and delivery taught me to be more understanding and appreciate pupils' unique abilities and challenges (P2, P3, P4). "My multigrade

teaching experience has fostered adaptability and creativity; improved classroom management, shaping me to be more effective and empathetic" (P6, P15). "Being a multigrade teacher shaped me into a more flexible, resourceful and compassionate educator" (P12)

However, despite these challenges, teachers also experience significant positive impacts on their well-being. Many teachers find deep personal and spiritual fulfillment in their work:

"It shifted my perspective from being a sole authority to being a facilitator and mentor" (P7). "The role is not just to deliver lesson, but as a facilitator, mentor and guide" (P11). "It shifts the practice to student-centered, learning and fostering a collaborative environment" (P15). "a sense of fulfillment and joy from seeing learners' abilities learn and grow together" (P7, P11).

They describe teaching as an act of "using your heart" and a 'form of service, of cultural preservation, and of love'. Witnessing student improvement and growth brings immense joy. For some, teaching in a multi-grade setting genuinely 'bumped up the happiness a little and kept it more consistent'. "Ano, teaching is ah. I can say that teaching is using your heart. Oo tлага! (P1). "This journey has changed everything. I no longer see teaching as just a career. It is a form of service, and of love" (P5). "Teaching make me happy, and kept it more consistent" (P8)

Overall, the multi-grade classroom profoundly shapes teachers. It simultaneously fosters robust professional development, leading to more adaptable, creative, empathetic, and ultimately fulfilled educators. The ability to manage stress and receive adequate support are crucial factors in ensuring that the positive impacts on well-being outweigh the negative ones.

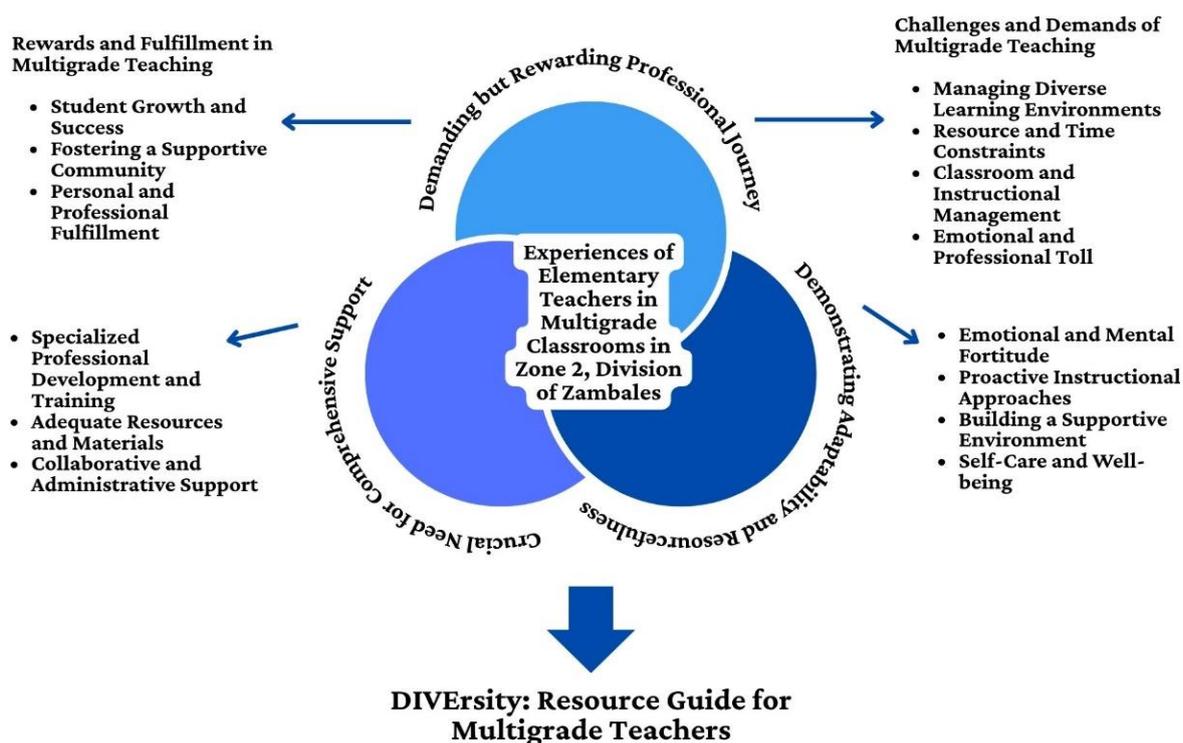


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in the Multigrade Classrooms of Zone 2, Division of Zambal

Teachers face significant challenges, including managing diverse learners, resource limitations, and intensive planning. Despite this, they find the experience profoundly rewarding, primarily through witnessing student growth, fostering a collaborative community, and experiencing personal and professional fulfillment. To navigate the unique demands, teachers demonstrate remarkable adaptability and employ various innovative strategies. This includes maintaining emotional and mental fortitude, using proactive instructional approaches (like differentiated instruction and strategic time management), building supportive environments, and prioritizing self-care and well-being. To be effective, teachers in multigrade settings require a robust and multifaceted support system. This includes specialized professional development, adequate resources, and comprehensive collaborative and administrative backing, which are crucial for developing unique pedagogical skills.

The overlapping nature of these elements signifies that these dimensions are not isolated but are deeply intertwined and influence one

another, hence, a conceptual framework that visually represents this was created to provide a holistic understanding of the multi-grade teaching experience and the factors that contribute to it, as seen in figure 1 in the previous page.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were extracted based from the findings of this study:

1. Elementary teachers in multi-grade classrooms have highly demanding yet profoundly fulfilling professional role. They exhibit remarkable resilience in the complexities of teaching, learning and planning. Their dedication fosters collaborative and transformative learning environments, which contribute significantly to student growth and community building despite inherent challenges.
2. The analysis of teachers' perceptions reveals that the multi-grade classroom, despite its inherent challenges, is a profoundly rewarding environment. The pri-

mary sources of satisfaction stem from observing significant student growth (academic and personal) among diverse age groups. These experiences cultivate a deep sense of purpose and fulfillment for multi-grade educators.

3. Teaching in multi-grade settings presents a highly demanding and emotionally taxing environment for educators. The challenges of managing diverse learning environments with limited resources and time, coupled with difficulties in classroom and instructional management, culminate in significant emotional and professional tolls on teachers. Hence, underscore a need for interventions.
4. The coping strategies employed highlights the critical role of a multi-faceted approach to thrive in these unique educational settings. Effective multi-grade teaching centers on a teacher's emotional resilience; their ability to implement differentiated instructional strategies; foster a supportive classroom and broader community; and their commitment to personal well-being.
5. Effective multi-grade teaching relies on a well-rounded support system that integrates specialized training, ample resources, and strong collaborative and administrative backing to empower educators in their complex roles.
6. Multi-grade teaching profoundly shapes educators who are also adaptable and empathetic professionals. The unique demands and challenges of these classrooms, ultimately cultivate deep personal growth and a strong sense of purpose for nurturing diverse learners.

Recommendations

Based on the constructed conclusions, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Multi-grade teachers may continue to share differentiated instruction and collaborative learning strategies while seeking peer support and professional development. Principals may prioritize and provide specific training on multi-grade pedagogies and advocate for better resources.
2. Policymakers and School Heads may develop pre-service training modules on

multi-grade teaching and offer ongoing instructional and emotional support, recognizing their complex role.

3. Policymakers and School Heads may increase resource allocation for appropriate materials, technology, and infrastructure, enhance support systems to reduce teacher workload.
4. School Heads may reinforce teachers' coping strategies by establishing formal and informal platforms to discuss challenges and share strategies. They may engage parents and communities to collaborate.
5. Policymakers and Curriculum Developers may create specialized curriculum materials for multi-grade classrooms, especially for Indigenous Peoples Education.
6. Administrators may implement policies that support teachers' work-life balance and address workload concerns. They may also create policies that recognize the complexities of multi-grade instruction by providing adequate funding for professional development and considering reduced class sizes or additional support staff.
7. The results of the study may be submitted to the DepEd Division Office as a basis for policy enhancement and program development.
8. Future researchers could explore on the long-term impact of current support systems and interventions on teacher retention and student outcomes in multi-grade settings.

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