

Challenges and Coping Strategies of Multi-Grade Teachers

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Abstract

Multigrade classes in the Philippines are usually present in Elementary schools in remote areas where few students are in one-year level. Thus, teachers then handle multiple grade levels at a time. This study investigated the challenges and coping strategies of Multigrade teachers in the western part of the Philippines. The researchers employed a Transcendental phenomenological method in this study. They gathered the data through one-to-one interviews of multigrade teachers who have been teaching for at least four years. Following the data analysis of Wa-Mbaleka (2018), the results revealed that there were intrinsic, extrinsic, and system challenges experienced by these teachers. These challenges involved unpreparedness in teaching multigrade, low multigrade allowances, the experience of stress, language barrier, classroom management struggles, lack of resources, danger in going to stations, workload, absenteeism, lack of stakeholders' support, and lack of trainings. However, they showed positivity in their work and applied the right coping strategies to lessen their burden. Among these coping strategies were praying, using the web, having time management, self-conditioning, developing plans, and doing research. The participants believed that handling Multigrade classes requires time, effort, and balance. Through these experiences, teachers learned to adjust and cope with the challenges they were facing. Thus, they became better educators.

Keywords: *Intrinsic challenge; Extrinsic Challenge; System challenge; Coping Strategy; Phenomenology; Philippines*



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INTRODUCTION

Multigrade teaching occurs when one teacher handles more than one grade level (Little, 2001). The students are also of different ages. In the Philippines, the Department of Education implemented the policies and guidelines in the organization and operation of Multigrade classes (DepED Order No. 96, s. 1997). Multigrade education is one of the Department's strategies to provide access to quality education for all school-age children in remote communities where enrollment does not warrant the organization of Mono-grade classes. It is one way to address the problems and issues to make education accessible to all wherever they are, despite distance and situations. 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.

The teacher will have a hard time designing and creating activities for a Multigrade class. It requires more discipline, higher concentration, and more focus to benefit from effective strategies. Besides, pupils' achievement may be inadequate if programs do not have the required resources and teachers are not adequately trained.

Teachers feel that there is too much work in Multigrade classrooms from preparing lesson plans, classroom management techniques, educational facilities, instructional materials, and community support that contribute and improve learning outcomes. According to Mulaudzi (2016), there are several problems experienced by Multigrade teachers in primary schools at Nzhelele East Circuit, Africa, namely: Curriculum organization, work overload, classroom management, learner performance, and lack of support.

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 (Naparan & 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 researchers consider it necessary to investigate multigrade teachers' challenges and coping strategies in Western Mindanao, Philippines. This research then is anchored on the three-level typology that includes macro, micro, and meso level challenges (Raffo et al., 2007, p.7). The macro-level refers to the system-wide challenges or external interferences-challenges beyond the MG teacher's control, such as resource challenges, financing, and training (Brown, 2010; Joubert, 2010; Little, 2006). The micro-level refers to the individual's challenges such as personal attitudes and lack of knowledge and skills (Little, 2006; Tsolakidis & Constantinidi, 2006). Moreover, the meso level refers to the school-level challenges such as workload implications and school environment challenges (Raffo et al., 2007). Guided by the three-level typology, this research explored the challenges and the coping strategies of Multigrade teachers of Guipos, Zamboanga Del Sur, Philippines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multigrade teaching is regarded as an instructional organization where a teacher teaches more than one grade level in a single classroom (Aryal, 2003; Berry, 2010). A Multigrade classroom contrasts with the usual classroom organization pattern since there are multigrade level students in one classroom. In many graded systems, age and grade are congruent. However, there is a different situation in a multigrade classroom as grade level repetition and acceleration are common in this classroom.

Many terms are found in the literature to describe the multigrade setting. The terms such as "Combination classes," "Forced mixed-age classes," and "Forced mixed grade" usually refer to settings arising through the necessity and the characteristics of enrolment (Little, 2005). Multigrade setting results from some conditions such as low population density, few available teachers, mobile schools, and absenteeism of teachers (Little, 2005). The practice of multigrade teaching is widespread in rural areas as a smaller number of enrolments is usually observed in some schools (Aksoy, 2008).

In teaching in multigrade classrooms, teachers usually experience problems with students' skills, such as difficulty in writing and other academic problems (Blease, & Condy, 2015). Teachers find it challenging to hone the skills of students coming from multiple grade levels. They need to manage their time well for them to help better the learners of different year levels. In many cases, multigrade classrooms lack organization, not so much practicing peer tutoring, and not presenting knowledge in a logical sequence (Sampson, & Condy, 2016).

Among the significant concerns of teachers in teaching multigrade is the insufficiency of time (Mulryan-Kyne, 2004). Teachers have their design of lessons to teach in their respective classes. However, they have different grade levels of students to teach. So, it leads most of the time to unfinished lessons. They need more time to process the lessons for every grade level.

Multigrade teachers also experienced some barriers in attaining effective education, such as unqualified teachers to teach in multigrade setting, insufficient resources, insufficient financial support, and parents' lack of interest in their children's education (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Multigrade teachers need to live with the different barriers that they faced. Some of them even shared some of their resources for their students. They shared a portion of their salary to provide learning materials for their students (Castigador, 2019; Msimanga, 2019).

Heterogeneity is always present in many multigrade classrooms because of the different age brackets of students coming from different grade levels. MG teachers face this as a challenge and, at the same time, a coping strategy. To effectively teach Multigrade classes, teachers need to reduce, at the same time, maximize students' heterogeneity (Hyry-Beihammer, & Hascher, 2015). They found it very challenging to teach mixed classes. So, they try to find ways to find commonalities among their students. At the same time, they also maximize the dispersed characteristics and abilities of their students. Those advanced students were allowed to help their classmates while the teacher is also teaching the other students.

Grouping the students is also a way of effectively managing the multigrade classes. MG teachers performed flexible grouping practices (Casserly, Tiernan, & Maguire, 2019). In grouping the students, the teachers can save time in presenting the lessons. The students also can interact with each other and express their ideas with each other. In this way, learning will take place.

The literature presented in this study narrates the multigrade setting. It also presents the different challenges faced by MG teachers in their classrooms and their respective schools' environment. It also presented some ways on how they manage their situations. However, the challenges and coping strategies are taken separately in those literature. Thus, this research explored the challenges and then presented some coping strategies that these MG teachers employed to address them.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative-phenomenological type of research. Phenomenology highlights the experiential or lived aspect of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Nelson, 2011). The researchers dealt with the teachers' experiences, especially their challenges in handling multi-grade classes and their different coping strategies. The study was then conducted at one school district in a fourth-class municipality of western Mindanao, Philippines. There were fourteen teacher participants in this study who have at least four years of experience in handling Multi-grade classes purposively by the researchers.

After seeking permission from the Schools' division superintendent and their respective principals, the researchers asked the study participants' voluntary participation. After signing the informed consent, the researchers asked them for an interview.

This research followed the phenomenological data analysis of Wa-Mbaleka (2018). It started with completing interview transcripts, developing codes, finding recurring codes, writing the interpretation of the data, member checking, and addressing the research questions. The researchers made sure that the essence of the results matches with the focus of the study. They also made sure that they presented the voice of the research participants as they bracketed their biases about multigrade education. The results really conveyed the pattern of experiences of the research participants.

The strategy for generating knowledge in phenomenological research typically involves conversational techniques, with the unstructured interview identified as a valuable approach when collecting data on sensitive topics (Walker, 2007). In this study, the researchers assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity. They also assured them that the data retrieved are only for the usage of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The three-level typology was used in multigrade teachers' challenges: intrinsic, extrinsic, and System challenges.

Intrinsic Challenges (Micro)

Intrinsic challenges pertain to teacher-related challenges that are also known as micro-level challenges. The micro-level refers to the challenges that teachers experienced individually. Based on the teacher participants' testimonies, the sub-themes that came out are Unpreparedness to teach Multigrade classes, Low Multigrade allowances, the experience of stress, and Language barrier. Teachers upon employed in the education department were unprepared to handle two or more classes in one classroom. Participant 1 said, "*Actually, dili jud ko kahibalo pa unsaon mag teach og multigrade kay katong ga eskwela ta atong college, wala ni gi introduce sa atoa.*" [Actually, I do not have any idea on how to teach a Multigrade classroom. It was not introduced to us in college.]

They also felt that the monetary allowance that they received was not enough. Participant 6 stated, "*Ang multigrade allowances wala jud ko kadawat ana sauna, dayon pagtransfer nako, nakadawat ko ug more or less P19,000. Lipay kayo ko pero abi nako continue nato yearly. Sus, pagka next year, P6,400 nalang man ako nadawat.*" [Before I was transferred to current school, I never received a monetary allowance. The year after I transferred to my current school, I received more or less P19,000. I was so happy as I hope for the same amount to be received the following year. However, the following year, I only received P6,400.]

Teachers in Multigrade classes indicated that their work had become more stressful and demanding because of the reports, school activities, co-curricular activities, and teaching two or more classes in one setting. Participant 7 shared, "*Natingala jud kaayo ko. Ok raman unta basta gamay lang ang bata pero sa kadaghan na stress jud ko. Dili nako feel nga happy ko. Dili ko makatulog inigkagabie ug hinuna-huna.*" [I was shocked because I have plenty of students. I am fine handling multigrade if there were only a few students. However, because there were plenty of them, I was so stressed and unhappy. I cannot sleep thinking about my class.]

Teachers also experienced the challenge of the language barrier. Some of their students are from an ethnicity that is different from that of the teacher. Participant 7 narrated, "*Maglisod ko ug adapt sa akong mga bata kay Muslim sila unya ako Bisaya, dili ko kasabot sa ilang inistoryahan. Sila pod dili kasabot sa akoang inistoryahan. Mao jud na ang usa sa akoang problema.*" [It was difficult for me to adjust for my

students in terms of Language since they were Muslims and I am a Cebuano. I cannot understand their dialect. On the one hand, they also cannot understand mine. This becomes my problem.]

Extrinsic Challenges (Meso)

These challenges are also known as school-level challenges. Teachers experienced different challenges such as distance, Lack of resources, danger in going to school, workload, and students' absenteeism. Most multigrade schools in the research environment were located in remote areas. Thus, teachers experienced the challenge in terms of distance. They have to ride in a habal-habal (motorbike) or walk through some kilometers to arrive at school. Participant 3 stated, "*Almost Multigrade schools are situated in far-flung barangays. My assigned school is too far from my home. Therefore, I have to wake up by four o'clock in the morning to prepare. By five thirty in the morning, I will be in the road waiting for a vehicle to go to my work area.*"

Teachers experience a Lack of resources for teaching. They maximize their limited resources in teaching multigrade. Participant 2 stated, "*We are in the new K-12 curriculum, but the multigrade teachers do not have all the resources like textbooks and teaching guides that are needed to teach multigrade classes.*" Participant 8 added, "*Naa mi sa isa ka building diri nga guba. Ang akoang kauban nga teacher naa sa stage na gatudlo kay kulang mi ug rooms.*" [We have one room that is already damaged. I even had a co-teacher who had her classes in our stage instead of the classroom since we lack classrooms.]

Teachers are commuting, going to school, and going home. Along the way, there were environmental hazards that may put their lives at risk. In some areas, there are rivers that they need to cross going to school. During rainy seasons, they are in danger of floods. Participant 11 narrated, "*It was raining heavily at that time, but we needed to go home since it was getting late. We had to cross the river despite the flood. As we were in the middle of the river, the water's current became fast and strong. At that time, we all thought that we were going to die. Thank God, we were safe.*"

Teaching two or more grades at the same time is doing the work equivalently for two teachers. Multigrade teachers find their workload particularly challenging due to their extra work and multiple roles in the school. Participant 11 mentioned, "*A multigrade teacher has much work to do compared to a mono-grade teacher.*" Some teachers have other ancillary functions in the school. Participant 3 said, "*Since I am the senior in our school, I have many things to do aside from teaching multigrade. I am the Information Communication Technology (ICT) coordinator, the Boy Scout of the Philippines (BSP) coordinator, and The Officer-In-charge.*"

Working children do not have enough time to dedicate to school. Multigrade teachers experienced that some students are frequently absent due to some work at home. Participant 5 narrated, "*Gusto jud ko makahibalo ang mga bata, pero usahay, mo absent sila kay pabantayon ug manghud or patrabahon sa bukid.*" [I want my pupils to learn in school. However, I have observed that some were absent, for they were asked to take care of their younger siblings. Some of them also were asked to work on their farm.]

System Challenges (Macro)

System challenges are also referred as Macro level challenges. They pertain to system-wide or beyond school challenges experienced by multigrade teachers. Two themes emerged regarding this kind of challenge: Lack of stakeholders' support and Lack of curriculum training. The stakeholders that the participants were referring are some parents and barangay officials. Participant 9 narrated, "*Dili jud kayo supportive sila para sa improvement sa kahibalo sa ilang anak. Maghatag tag assignment sa bata para ma follow up, masuko ang parents kay kalas daw ug gas.*" [Parents were not supportive to the education of their

children. If I give my pupils assignments to give follow up learning for their lesson, the parents will get angry because studying at night means more kerosene consumption for the light.] Participant 1 also said, *"Sometimes, our Barangay officials seem to offer limited help."*

Lack of curriculum training was the second system challenge. This challenge is due to seldom training regarding multigrade teaching these teachers' experiences in their locality. According to participant 11, *"Seminars on Multigrade teaching here in our division are rare."*

Coping Strategies

To minimize stressful events and reduce conflict in handling Multigrade classes, teachers shared these coping strategies based on their experiences. They found them helpful as they performed their responsibilities as Multigrade teachers. The multigrade teachers coping strategies are praying, using the web, having time management, and self-conditioning. According to them, prayer is the best weapon they have. With the help of God, everything is under control. Participant 12 narrated, *"I can survive with God's grace because He has given me the strength and courage to continue."* Participant 4 added, *"I pray to God that he will give me more patience."*

Amidst the challenges they experienced, Multigrade teachers found a way to cope with them. They were aware of the technology surrounding them. To make their teaching-learning useful and enjoyable, they were surfing the web and downloaded educational videos. Participant 2 mentioned, *"I am thankful for the new technologies that had helped me a lot as a multigrade teacher because I can download and research to cope with my challenges."*

Organizing and planning how much a teacher spends on specific activities are very important. It is better to manage his/her time efficiently to save time. One of the coping strategies of teachers is time management. Participant 13 stated, *"time management jud bahala na og usahay madala sa balay ang trabahao basta mahuman lang ang mga reports."* [It is good to have time management. It does not matter bringing paper works at home as long as I can finish my reports.]

Sometimes, teachers have a tough time when they do not know what to do. Thus, they try to calm themselves by thinking the right thoughts, taking the right actions, and getting the results they wanted. This coping strategy is about self-conditioning. Participant 3 said, *"I am just a positive thinker kind of teacher. Being a multigrade teacher is part of my job. And then, since I was a child, I dreamed of becoming a teacher. Thus, teaching is not only a job but a mission."*

Discussion

Teaching in multigrade classes is always associated with different challenges. These challenges can be of micro, meso, and macro levels. Intrinsic challenges include unpreparedness to teach multigrade classes, low multigrade allowances, stress experience, and language barriers. Many multigrade teachers were not exposed to multigrade teaching courses during their pre-service time (Buarphan, Inrit, & Kochasila, 2018). When these teachers were hired and given multigrade classrooms to teach, they were not prepared to face the situation. As a result, some multigrade teachers exhibited low self-efficacy than mono-grade teachers (Doğan, Çapan, & Çiğerci, 2020; Tutt, 2019). Many teachers do not prefer teaching Multigrade classrooms (Brown, 2008, p.38). They prefer single grades because multigrade classes mean more planning, preparation, organization, and work. Teachers have also encountered language problems in teaching in remote areas, usually in multigrade classrooms (Engin, 2018). Thus, training is needed to develop teachers' professional and personal competencies (Cadosales, 2017).

Multigrade teachers also experienced different extrinsic challenges such as distance, lack of resources, danger going to school, workload, and students' absenteeism. Berry (2000) argues that professional and social isolation is one of the challenges multigrade teachers face. He indicates that Multigrade teaching often takes place in remote schools. Moreover, teachers face difficulties dealing with a Multigrade class and other constraints such as lack of resources, infrequent supervision, and poor living conditions. Multigrade teachers experienced isolation and dispersion, lack of physical facilities, and pupils deprived backgrounds (Hargreaves et al., 2001; Kucita et al., 2013). Multigrade teachers experienced students' reading problems and a lack of resources such as books, stationery, learning materials, warm clothes, and food (Blease & Condy, 2014; 2015).

As revealed in this study, system challenges of multigrade teachers included lack of stakeholders' support and lack of curriculum training. Parents' attitude towards Multigrade teaching is another challenge faced by multigrade teachers (Brown, 2008, p.18). Despite the apparent utility value of parental support in the education process, it seems that Multigrade teachers do not always find it easy to gain parents' support. In contrast, this research's findings contrasted with what Karlberg-Granlund (2019) mentioned that teaching in small village schools as that of rural multigrade schools is built on collaboration with the stakeholders. He emphasized teamwork, yet in this study, teamwork is challenging to observe among stakeholders, particularly the parents' support. Teachers preferred not to teach in multigrade classes due to curriculum adjustment and limited capability building among teachers (Kucita et al., 2013).

Being faced with different challenges, multigrade teachers tried to apply coping strategies to deal with their situations. Based on this study results, multigrade teachers do praying, using the web, having time management, and self-conditioning. Multigrade teachers relied heavily on teacher-centered methods (Taole, 2020), shared their resources (Msimanga, 2019), performed flexible grouping practices (Casserly, Tiernan, & Maguire, 2019), initiated self-directed learning, peer tutoring, and cooperative learning (Msimanga, 2020), had various teaching methods such as peer teaching, integrated teaching and having resources in the community, nature and discarded materials (Mortazavizadeh et al, 2017), employed different strategies such as classroom management, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, connecting lessons to real life, and integrating technology (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021). Little (2005) argues that many policymakers need to be aware of the Multigrade reality and then develop resources, planning, curriculum, materials, teacher preparation, and assessment strategies in collaboration with teachers. Thus, increasing the quality and quantity of training helps multigrade teachers cope with multigrade classrooms' challenges (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The study was undertaken to identify the challenges and coping strategies of Multi-grade teachers. Based on the results, Multi-grade classes have many challenges: intrinsic, extrinsic, and system challenges. The teachers believe that handling multi-grade classes has much work to do. It requires time, effort, and patience. Their experiences may sometimes lead to life-threatening situations, yet they proved to be flexible. They learned to adjust and cope with the challenges through God's grace, accept them positively, and find ways to make life easier.

Since this research focused more on the challenges and coping strategies of multi-grade teachers from multiple aspects of their life as teachers, it would be better that future studies will deal on the multi-grade teachers inside the classroom. Future researchers can explore on how MG teachers perform their classroom management as they are handling students with multiple year levels.

Future researchers can also explore on how MG teachers aim for their professional development. Being in a multi-grade environment is a challenging task. Thus, there is a need to nurture the skills of the teachers for them to handle their situations.

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