

# Multigrade Teaching in the Philippines

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Multigrade teaching arises within a graded education system when a single classroom includes learners from two or more grade levels, in contrast to the conventional model in which each class consists of students from only one grade level. While age and grade are typically aligned, variations occur in contexts where grade repetition or acceleration is common. Berry (2017) identifies three primary reasons for the adoption of multigrade teaching across both developed and developing countries. First, it is a necessity in small, often remote schools with limited staff, where one to three teachers deliver the full primary cycle across up to eight grade levels. These “multigrade schools” extend educational access to marginalized populations and increase participation particularly among girls by bringing schooling closer to communities. Second, in larger urban or suburban schools, multigrade teaching is used to address uneven enrollment, combining grade levels to balance class sizes or to compensate for absent teachers when substitutes are unavailable, as reported in parts of Africa and the Caribbean (World Bank, 2017). Third, it may serve as a deliberate pedagogical choice. In some developed countries, multiage classrooms are promoted to foster social development, while in developing

contexts, multigrade teaching is often valued for its cost-effectiveness in expanding access to education (Berry, 2017).

Beyond widening access, multigrade instruction has the potential to equal and in some cases surpass—the quality of monograde classes (Barbetta et al., 2023), contributing not only to academic achievement but also to learners’ social development. Realizing this potential requires curricula aligned with learners’ diverse abilities, effective classroom management strategies such as flexible grouping, and sustained investments in teacher training (Bacani, 2020). As an alternative education modality, multigrade teaching entails instructional methods that diverge significantly from conventional approaches (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021). Accordingly, teachers’ professional competencies must be continuously strengthened through targeted training and capacity-building initiatives (Anzano et al., 2021).

Scheduling practices also shape the quality of multigrade instruction. Many schools adopt uniform timetables in which all grade levels in a combined class study the same subject at the same time (e.g., Science and Health from 9:00–9:40 a.m., followed by Mathematics after recess). Others adopt integrated scheduling, enabling simultaneous delivery of multiple subjects across grades. Classroom management styles likewise vary: approximately 80 percent of multigrade schools in the Philippines rely on traditional management practices such as structured rules and routines, while a smaller proportion employ innovative, learner-centered approaches (DepEd, 2018). Although methods such as cooperative learning, peer teaching, and interactive activities (e.g., singing, games) are increasingly used, conventional lectures and teacher-led discussions remain the most prevalent strategies (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015).

Multigrade education is neither a recent innovation nor an

experimental model. As Bacani (2020) underscores, it has existed for over a century, shaped largely by geographic isolation and economic necessity. In the Philippines, multigrade teaching has proven to be a cost-effective strategy for reaching underserved, remote areas with low student populations per grade. At present, nearly one-third of the country's public elementary schools implement multigrade instruction, enhancing both access and learning outcomes. Ultimately, multigrade teaching entails the simultaneous instruction of learners across different grade levels, and often across diverse ages and abilities, within a single classroom. Such a context requires not only specialized pedagogical strategies and methodologies but also adaptive classroom management skills, reflecting the complex realities and opportunities inherent in multigrade education.

### **Multigrade Teaching in Various Contexts**

Multigrade teaching in the Philippines presents a complex set of experiences shaped by geographical isolation, socio-economic conditions, and the simultaneous instruction of multiple grade levels. Teachers deployed to remote communities face unique demands, yet many display resilience and dedication in fulfilling their responsibilities. For instance, Castigador (2019) examined the lived experiences of three seasoned multigrade teachers in Lemery, Iloilo, highlighting their personal journeys into the profession, family support, time management, and flexibility. The study identified recurring themes anchor or lifeline, uncertainty, and submissiveness which reflected acceptance, acknowledgment, and continuous learning. Similarly, Lariosa et al. (2022) reported that multigrade teachers in remote Sarangani barangays derived meaning and satisfaction from their work, valuing community hospitality and developing strong professional commitment despite persistent hardships.

In contrast, other studies emphasize the severe material and logistical constraints of multigrade settings. Quejada and Orale (2018), for example, documented pervasive poverty in a Samar multigrade school, where teachers frequently used personal funds to provide learning materials and food for students. Access to the school required arduous travel, and pupils faced similarly challenging commutes. Although participants still found teaching fulfilling, most expressed a preference for assignments in more accessible locations.

From a broader perspective, Montalbo et al. (2021) synthesized 18 multigrade studies conducted across various contexts, concluding that teacher success depends largely on wholehearted commitment, a sense of accomplishment, and recognition of the broader value of multigrade education. The review emphasized that resilience, resourcefulness, and innovation enable teachers to overcome barriers, while recommending immersive internships, mentoring programs, and certification pathways specifically tailored to multigrade instruction. In a similar vein, Naparan and Alinsug (2021) found that multigrade classrooms can achieve outcomes comparable to larger schools when teachers employ learner-centered strategies such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and real-life applications.

The literature consistently highlights interconnected challenges that affect teachers' motivation, instructional quality, and overall well-being. These include difficulties in lesson planning, time and classroom management, curriculum adaptation, resource provision, training deficits, and excessive workloads. Kalender and Erdem (2021) grouped these into three thematic areas: teachers' negative perceptions of multigrade work arising from exhaustion and demotivation, the complexity of catering to multiple grade levels in lesson planning, and the strain of excessive

paperwork. Similarly, Mulaudzi (2016) underscored the lack of both pre-service and in-service training, the mismatch of subject assignments, and the neglect of proven multigrade strategies such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning.

Other studies have detailed operational and structural constraints. Erden (2020) identified problems in management, instructional strategies, and assessment, attributing these to weak institutional support. Lapuz (2015) cited poor accessibility, inadequate facilities, financial burdens, and reduced family time for teachers assigned to far-flung schools. Okamoto and Potane (2020) observed that classrooms originally designed for single-grade use hindered effective multigrade management, while the preparation of instructional materials remained costly and time-consuming. Daga (2021) distilled six recurring challenges: lesson planning, resource utilization, assessment, process management, performance monitoring, and reporting. These issues were compounded by inadequate contextualized lesson plans, limited parental support, and poor internet connectivity. Likewise, Montalbo et al. (2021) emphasized geographic isolation, insufficient preparation, and the strain of balancing multiple roles, all of which contributed to burnout. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Akdaş and Kalman (2021) observed that persistent problems such as parental indifference, unsuitable materials, and poor infrastructure were further exacerbated by distancing protocols and restrictions. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for systemic reforms in teacher training, resource allocation, infrastructure development, and administrative support.

Coping strategies in multigrade classrooms often blend personal resilience with practical adaptations to address structural and contextual barriers. Montalbo et al. (2021) identified resourcefulness, innovativeness, and resiliency as core coping traits, supplemented by a sense of

accomplishment and recognition of the value of multigrade teaching. Larson (2021) similarly found that acceptance, active coping, and planning were the most common approaches. Other strategies highlight professional growth and collaboration. Makabenta (2021) emphasized time management, openness to change, and peer mentoring, while Naparan and Alinsug (2021) documented coping practices such as prayer, use of online resources, self-conditioning, and continuous planning. UNESCO (2015) further encouraged viewing diversity as an asset, promoting collaborative learning, multitasking skills, and partnerships with local communities to reduce teacher isolation and enhance resource access.

Ultimately, coping in multigrade classrooms is multifaceted. Teachers rely on adaptability, creativity, and collaboration not only to survive challenging conditions but also to enhance student learning. These mechanisms demonstrate that, even in resource-constrained environments, multigrade education can succeed when grounded in strong personal commitment and supported by community engagement.

## **Transition Experiences of Multigrade School Teachers: A Case Study**

Teaching in a multigrade classroom requires educators to adopt approaches specifically tailored to the distinctive demands of this learning environment. Such assignments inevitably pose challenges that test teachers' capacity to maintain instructional effectiveness and achieve desired learning outcomes. This study seeks to deepen understanding of the complexities inherent in multigrade teaching. It examines how teachers transition from conventional single-grade classrooms to managing learners of diverse ages and abilities, the challenges encountered during this shift,

and the strategies employed to address them.

### *Methodology*

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing the phenomenological method. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences by providing both textural and structural descriptions of participants' perspectives. The research was conducted in the Municipality of San Remigio, Philippines, where 13 multigrade schools are located. From these, seven teachers representing seven different schools were purposively selected. The group consisted of five female and two male teachers, chosen according to the following criteria: they had to be permanent, regular teachers; possess at least three years of experience in multigrade teaching; have participated in the implementation of modular distance learning; and have been involved in preparations for the transition to in-person classes. The list of potential participants was secured through the Office of the Schools District Supervisor, and initial contact was established through school visits.

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview guide composed of three main questions, each supplemented by two to four follow-up prompts. Prior to data collection, formal permission was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent, the Schools District Supervisor, and the school heads of the participating institutions. Participants were fully oriented regarding the study's objectives, procedures, and their roles. They were informed of their rights, potential benefits, and possible risks, and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. They were also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

Interviews were conducted in June 2023 and completed within the same month. The researcher visited each school, provided the interview

guide, and conducted the interview upon approval. With participants' consent, interviews were video-recorded; if a participant declined, audio recording was used as an alternative. To ensure reliability, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted after the individual interviews to verify the consistency of responses.

All responses were coded using pseudonyms to safeguard participant confidentiality. The study adhered to the key stages of phenomenological analysis, with data collection and analysis conducted in part simultaneously. Interviews conducted in Filipino or in the local mother tongue, such as Kinaray-a, were transcribed and translated into English. Observation notes were likewise examined. Thematic analysis was applied to systematically organize and interpret the data according to the research questions.

### *Findings*

Through careful scrutiny, comparison, and analysis of the information gathered from the interviews and focus group discussion, it was revealed that the lived experiences of multigrade teachers centered on their emotions, adaptation processes, and approaches to addressing learners' concerns within the multigrade classroom. The major challenges they encountered were closely tied to the realities of managing a learning environment with diverse learners, as well as the various factors influencing the teaching–learning process.

To further explore whether participants initiated specific strategies in response to these challenges, the researcher also examined their coping mechanisms. From this analysis, four overarching themes emerged, capturing the core of the respondents' lived experiences as multigrade school teachers.

*Learners' diversity as a source of empowerment.* Multigrade teaching commonly entails instructing children from two or even three grade levels within the same classroom, particularly in schools characterized by low enrollment, limited teaching staff, and only a few classrooms. Such contexts are prevalent in last-mile schools, with at least six schools in the District of San Remigio fitting this profile. As a result, classrooms are marked by diversity not only in age and sex but, most significantly, in learners' abilities. Rather than perceiving this diversity solely as a challenge, participants emphasized that it has encouraged them to exercise greater creativity and has empowered them to explore more flexible and innovative teaching strategies.

*Community immersion is enlightening.* Multigrade schools are often situated in close-knit communities where relationships extend beyond the classroom. Teachers not only become familiar with residents but, in many cases, share in their homes, resources, and daily way of life. In remote areas, teachers may reside within the school premises or with local families, leading to full immersion in the community. Such experiences foster a deeper understanding of local attitudes, values, and aspirations, enabling teachers to build stronger connections with parents and to engage with learners in ways that reflect and respect their lived realities.

*Education as a lifeline.* Even in single-grade schools, education is widely regarded as a vital pathway to social and economic advancement, particularly by parents. Multigrade teachers observed that parents in their communities consistently demonstrate a strong aspiration to improve their families' lives through their children's schooling. Learners themselves also recognize education as a crucial avenue for better opportunities. Within these schools, both parents and children view education not merely as a formal requirement but as a lifeline toward a more secure and promising

future.

*Learning is a continuous process.* Assignment to a multigrade school often reinforces the notion that learning is a continuous process. Even after completing formal education and gaining field experience, teachers in these settings recognize the need for ongoing growth. They develop not only in their instructional skills but also in leadership, adaptability, and social relationship-building. For many, multigrade teaching proves to be professionally fulfilling, as it nurtures both personal growth and stronger human and community relations.

Teaching and learning are inherently complex processes, particularly within the multigrade school context. Although research on teachers' lived experiences in these settings remains limited, existing studies provide valuable insights. Castigador (2019) observed that multigrade teachers demonstrate an understanding of their practice characterized by knowing, acknowledging, and continuous learning. In a similar vein, Lariosa et al. (2022) underscored the passion and commitment that sustain multigrade teachers in their roles. Conversely, Quejada and Orale (2018) reported that, while teachers often find the work rewarding, many also express a preference for assignments in schools with easier access and more favorable learning environments.

The discourse on multigrade education frequently emphasizes its disadvantages. Teachers are often deployed to remote areas with limited accessibility, where communities face economic hardship and living conditions differ substantially from those in rural or urban centers. Schools in these contexts frequently lack even the most basic facilities, compelling learners to depend on outdated or insufficient learning materials. At the forefront of these challenges are the teachers themselves, who must navigate and manage these conditions while striving to deliver quality

education.

From the analysis of the interview and FGD responses, this study identified four major themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of multigrade teachers

*Limited learning resources and facilities.* The shortage of learning resources presents a significant challenge in multigrade classrooms. The physical condition of school buildings itself reflects the scarcity of support available to teachers, learners, and stakeholders, who often operate within rundown or makeshift facilities. To bridge these gaps, teachers frequently design and produce their own supplementary materials, particularly those requiring contextualization and localization. Financial constraints further compound these difficulties, as multigrade schools typically receive only limited allocations for their Monthly Operating and Other Expenses (MOOE), which are often inadequate to fund projects aimed at improving the school environment. In the absence of teacher ingenuity and resourcefulness, these limitations risk undermining the quality of learners' basic education.

*Heavy workload.* One of the most pressing drawbacks of multigrade teaching is the heavy workload borne by teachers. They are tasked with managing multiple learning areas across two or more grade levels, a responsibility that demands significant time and preparation. Beyond instructional duties, teachers must also comply with a wide array of reporting requirements and administrative deliverables on daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly bases. The burden is further intensified by ancillary assignments and, in many cases, by serving as school-in-charge. Collectively, these responsibilities create a workload that is both demanding and unsustainable, placing considerable strain on teachers' professional and personal well-being.

*Difficulty in classroom management.* Classroom management challenges are present in both single-grade and multigrade settings; however, they take on added complexity in the latter. In multigrade schools, these challenges stem less from learner behavior and more from the structural demands of the learning environment. Teachers must carefully design and organize classroom spaces, including the arrangement of furniture and learning materials, to accommodate multiple grade levels within a single room. The central task is to ensure that all learners, despite differences in age, grade level, and ability, are provided with equitable opportunities for engagement and learning.

*Limited opportunities for technology-supported teaching and learning.* Modern educational technology is often absent in multigrade schools, primarily due to the lack of internet connectivity or, in many cases, even electricity infrastructure. Electricity, once considered non-essential, has now become fundamental for the use of basic instructional equipment such as televisions, audio systems, and projectors. Without electricity and internet access, teachers are deprived of updated teaching resources and emerging educational trends, which limits their capacity to design engaging and interactive lessons. Consequently, the absence of technology not only diminishes instructional effectiveness but also reduces learners' motivation and enjoyment.

These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the multifaceted challenges of multigrade teaching. Kalender and Erdem (2021) observed that multigrade teachers view their work as exhausting and demanding, often compounded by low learner participation. Similarly, Mulaudzi (2016) noted teacher disillusionment with multigrade school assignments. Other scholars (Lapuz, 2015; Erden, 2020; Okamoto & Potane, 2020; Daga, 2021; Montalbo et al., 2021) have documented parallel

difficulties, including geographical isolation, curriculum and assessment challenges, insufficient learning materials, lack of specialized training, and minimal parental involvement.

In many communities, teachers are not only responsible for instruction but are also regarded as problem-solvers for broader school and community concerns. While they play a pivotal role in sustaining education under difficult circumstances, teachers themselves face physical, mental, and emotional strain. Despite these challenges, it is noteworthy that many have developed adaptive strategies and coping mechanisms that enable them to persevere in their work. Such resilience is particularly crucial for educators assigned to multigrade schools, where professional demands are amplified by resource and contextual constraints.

*Being resourceful, innovative, and resilient.* Resourcefulness is a critical attribute for teaching success, particularly when supporting learners with clear goals and aspirations. Innovative teaching strategies extend beyond the simple transmission of lessons; they foster curiosity, inspire a passion for learning, and equip students with the skills necessary to achieve meaningful outcomes. Equally important is resilience, which enables teachers to adapt to the demands of their profession and address challenges that disrupt the teaching–learning process. Resilient educators concentrate on factors within their control and influence, rather than dwelling on circumstances beyond their power. For multigrade teachers, the interplay of resourcefulness, innovation, and resilience is indispensable, as these qualities sustain their effectiveness despite limited resources and heightened professional demands.

*Ability to collaborate and learn from each other.* Collaboration, defined as working together toward a shared goal, is fundamental in education, where the ultimate objective is the improvement of learner

outcomes. Teacher collaboration entails collective discussion, planning, and problem-solving, enabling educators to share insights and strategies that strengthen instructional practices. Often referred to as cooperative teaching, this approach is particularly valuable in multigrade schools, where teachers face heightened challenges. Through collaboration, educators can pool resources, integrate their diverse strengths and expertise, and generate synergy that extends beyond individual classrooms to address school-wide concerns.

*Presence of active parental and community support.* Research consistently demonstrates that learners with engaged parents exhibit better attendance, improved behavior, higher academic performance, stronger social skills, and greater adaptability to the learning environment. Parental involvement nurtures a lifelong love of learning, which is critical for sustained success. Parents play an essential role by setting realistic expectations, establishing consistent homework routines, monitoring progress, and reinforcing the value of effort. Beyond the household, active community participation in school programs and projects significantly strengthens multigrade schools. Given the persistent limitations in resources, fostering robust school–community partnerships is imperative. Equally important is the community’s commitment to supporting schools, ensuring that educational initiatives are both sustainable and impactful.

*Believing in the power of prayer.* Prayer is widely acknowledged as a powerful coping mechanism across various professions, and teaching is no exception. When other strategies prove insufficient, many educators turn to prayer as a sustaining force that provides strength and hope. For multigrade teachers, prayer often functions as both a personal source of resilience and a professional anchor amidst daily challenges. For learners, the integration of prayer into classroom life reinforces the role of faith as an

essential aspect of their holistic development and daily experience.

The literature offers valuable insights into how multigrade teachers manage the demands of their profession. Montalbo et al. (2021) identified resourcefulness, innovativeness, and resilience as key coping strategies, while Larson (2021) emphasized the importance of acceptance and systematic planning. Similarly, UNESCO (2015) noted that recognizing and leveraging learner diversity can itself serve as a coping mechanism, transforming challenges into opportunities for inclusive and adaptive teaching.

### *Recommendation*

The study recommends targeted policy interventions to strengthen the multigrade education system. Specifically, increased funding allocations are essential to address resource gaps and support the professional needs of teachers. Streamlining the multigrade curriculum is likewise necessary to ensure coherence, manageability, and alignment with national learning standards. Furthermore, policies should promote inclusivity, diversity, and collaboration as guiding principles of practice. Collectively, these measures are expected to enhance teacher effectiveness, improve learner outcomes, and ensure that multigrade education remains both equitable and sustainable.

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