

Instructional and Professional Experiences of Multigrade Teachers

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Abstract

This study explored the instructional and professional experiences of multigrade teachers in the Division of Malaybalay City during the 2025–2026 school year. Anchored on Differentiated Instruction Theory by Tomlinson and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, the study examined how multigrade teachers adapt instructional practices and develop professionally while handling multiple grade levels in one classroom. Using a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design by Moustakas (1994), the study involved six purposively selected multigrade teachers from public elementary schools. Data were gathered through validated semi-structured interviews conducted in three sessions per participant and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that multigrade teachers constantly adjusted instruction to address learners' varied needs, abilities, and learning paces through differentiated activities, flexible grouping, and adaptive teaching strategies. Teachers also experienced resource scarcity, overcrowded classrooms, and limited instructional materials, yet sustained instruction through creativity, improvisation, and resilience. Another major challenge involved managing multiple grade levels within limited instructional time, requiring structured routines, prioritization of essential competencies, and effective time management. In terms of professional advancement, teachers developed greater confidence, competence, resilience, and self-efficacy through repeated teaching experiences, collaboration with colleagues, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, trainings, and professional development activities. The study concluded that multigrade teaching is a continuous process of adaptation, collaboration, and professional growth that demands flexibility, commitment, and learner-centered instruction. The study recommended strengthening professional development, instructional supervision, resource provision, and institutional support for multigrade teachers and schools. The findings support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by promoting inclusive and equitable learning opportunities, particularly for learners in remote and underserved communities. The study also contributes to sustainable educational development by supporting teacher resilience, instructional effectiveness, and equitable access to quality education in marginalized areas.

Keywords: Classroom Management, Differentiated Instruction, Multigrade Classes, Professional Advancement, Resource Scarcity, Self-Efficacy, Teacher Resilience, Time Management, Transcendental Phenomenology

1. Introduction

Multigrade teaching serves as an important educational approach in rural and underserved communities where student population and educational resources are insufficient for organizing single-grade classes. In the Division of Malaybalay City, multigrade classes continue to exist because of low enrollment, inadequate instructional resources, and geographical limitations. Despite these constraints, multigrade education supports inclusive and accessible learning opportunities for children in remote and marginalized communities. Education, recognized as a fundamental right, faces persistent challenges in areas with inadequate staffing, classrooms, and instructional materials. These conditions place significant demands on multigrade teachers, who must simultaneously manage several grade levels, address diverse learner needs, and sustain meaningful instruction. Research showed that multigrade teachers rely on differentiated instruction, teamwork, and contextualized teaching approaches to support learners despite limited resources and institutional support (Marasigan, 2025; Chan et al., 2021).

The implementation of multigrade education in the Philippines is supported by several Department of Education policies. DepEd Order No. 96, s. 1997 established policies and guidelines for the operation of multigrade classes, including teacher assignments, instructional support, classroom provisions, and hardship allowances. DepEd Order No. 81, s. 2009 further strengthened multigrade implementation through specialized teacher training, professional development, monitoring systems, and teacher retention provisions. DepEd Order No. 36, s. 2021 reinforced support mechanisms through funding allocation for instructional materials, teacher training, and program monitoring. These policy frameworks recognize the importance of differentiated instruction, teacher readiness, resource support, and continuous professional development in improving multigrade education. However, despite these initiatives, multigrade teachers continue to experience instructional, administrative, and professional challenges that affect classroom delivery and professional advancement.

Related literature consistently highlights the complexity of multigrade instruction and the adaptability required of teachers handling multiple grade levels. Studies revealed that multigrade teachers encounter difficulties in differentiated instruction, lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, workload management, and resource limitations (Bagay, 2025; Naparan, 2021; Brecio, 2023; Kalender and Erdem, 2021; Medequillo and Gallardo, 2024). Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience, creativity, and commitment to sustaining instruction. Teachers commonly utilized differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, collaborative learning, flexible grouping, contextualized materials, modular lesson planning, and adaptive classroom management strategies to address diverse learner needs (Naparan and MaED, 2021; Hussain and Akhter, 2025; Chan et al., 2021). Studies also emphasized that teacher resilience, innovation, and adaptability are essential characteristics for successful multigrade teaching (Rondero and Casupanan, 2024; Bisaya and Ngilangil, 2025). Professional development emerged as a significant factor in improving teacher competence and instructional quality. Research highlighted the importance of continuous training, mentoring, peer collaboration, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and context-sensitive professional development programs in strengthening teacher effectiveness and self-efficacy (Dontogan et al., 2024; Barbetta et al., 2023; Urma and Callo, 2023). Administrative support, resource allocation, and community involvement were also identified as important factors in sustaining multigrade education and teacher well-being (Shareefa, 2020; Badol, 2025; Rapanta et al., 2021).

Globally, multigrade education is implemented in rural and underserved communities where low enrollment and limited educational resources make single-grade instruction impractical. International studies documented common issues related to workload, instructional complexity, limited training, and teacher burnout in multigrade settings (Shareefa, 2020; Barbetta et al., 2023; Hussain and Akhter, 2025). Nationally, multigrade education remains an important strategy in the Philippine basic education system, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. Government policies support the implementation of multigrade programs through teacher training, instructional support, and funding allocation. However, multigrade teachers continue to experience shortages in instructional materials, limited classroom facilities, overcrowding, and increased professional responsibilities. Locally, schools in the Division of Malaybalay City maintain multigrade classes because of low learner population and resource limitations. Teachers assigned in these schools frequently manage multiple grade levels within limited instructional time while addressing varying learner abilities and needs. Although multigrade teaching contributes significantly to educational access and inclusion, the lived realities of multigrade teachers in the local context remain insufficiently explored.

This study is anchored on Differentiated Instruction Theory and Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997). Differentiated Instruction Theory explains that effective teaching should adapt to learners' readiness, interests, abilities, and learning styles rather than applying uniform instruction. According to Tomlinson, teachers modify content, process, product, and learning environment to accommodate learner diversity. In multigrade classrooms, differentiated instruction is evident through flexible grouping, contextualized activities, peer teaching, independent learning, and varied assessment strategies. The theory supports the idea that multigrade teachers continuously adapt instructional approaches to address learners with different academic levels and developmental needs. It also highlights teachers' creativity, flexibility, and responsiveness in organizing classroom activities and sustaining learner engagement. Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997) explains how teachers' beliefs in their own capabilities influence instructional performance, resilience, and professional growth. Self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, encouragement, and emotional responses. In multigrade settings, teachers face challenges involving multiple curricula, workload demands, limited resources, and classroom management complexities. Teachers with stronger self-efficacy demonstrate greater confidence, persistence, and adaptability in addressing instructional challenges. Together, Differentiated Instruction Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how multigrade teachers adjust instruction, manage classroom demands, and develop professionally despite challenging teaching conditions.

Although existing literature extensively discussed instructional challenges, classroom management, differentiated instruction, and professional development in multigrade education, limited studies focused specifically on the lived instructional and professional experiences of multigrade teachers within the Division of Malaybalay City. Most studies emphasized generalized multigrade challenges without deeply examining how teachers personally navigate instructional delivery, time constraints, resource scarcity, and professional growth in local contexts. There is also limited qualitative exploration regarding how multigrade teachers develop resilience, self-efficacy, and professional competence through continuous classroom exposure and collaboration. Understanding these experiences is essential for improving instructional support, teacher development programs, administrative supervision, and policy implementation. This study aimed to explore the instructional delivery and professional advancement experiences of multigrade teachers in the Division of Malaybalay City during the 2025–2026 school year. Specifically, it sought to understand teachers lived experiences and develop an implementable strategic plan that addresses the emerging challenges of multigrade education.

This study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 – Quality Education, which promotes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all learners. Multigrade education supports educational access for children in remote and marginalized communities where formal single-grade instruction is not feasible. The study also

aligns with SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by addressing educational disparities experienced by learners in geographically isolated and underserved areas. By examining multigrade teaching realities, the study contributes to improving educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners. In addition, the study supports SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth through its focus on teacher professional development, teacher well-being, and institutional support systems that strengthen instructional effectiveness and professional competence. The study further connects with SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals by emphasizing collaboration among teachers, administrators, policymakers, and communities in strengthening multigrade education programs and support systems.

This study contributes to educational sustainability by strengthening understanding of instructional practices, teacher development, and learner support in multigrade settings. It promotes inclusive and equitable education by identifying strategies that improve teaching effectiveness in resource-limited schools. The study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by supporting educational access for learners in rural and underserved communities, helping reduce educational inequality and improve long-term community development. It also contributes to institutional sustainability by providing evidence-based insights that may guide policy improvement, instructional supervision, professional development, and administrative support for multigrade teachers. Furthermore, the study supports professional and community sustainability by emphasizing collaboration, mentoring, and continuous learning among teachers. Through strengthened teacher competence, self-efficacy, and resilience, multigrade education can continue to provide meaningful learning opportunities despite resource limitations and instructional challenges. Overall, the study highlights the importance of sustaining responsive, inclusive, and learner-centered educational practices that support both teachers and learners in multigrade classrooms.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed Transcendental Phenomenology by Clark Moustakas (1994) to examine the lived experiences of multigrade teachers in instructional delivery and professional advancement. The design aimed to capture participants' experiences while minimizing researcher bias through bracketing. Using Moustakas' phenomenological framework, the study explored how teachers balanced multiple grade levels, addressed diverse learner needs, and managed classroom realities. The phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to synthesize participants' experiences, construct meaning, and identify common themes related to teaching, classroom management, and professional growth. The design emphasized understanding participants' authentic experiences and perspectives regarding multigrade instruction.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Department of Education, Division of Malaybalay City, where multigrade classes are implemented in several public elementary schools. These schools are supervised by school heads, principals, head teachers, or teachers-in-charge responsible for instructional supervision and classroom management. Most multigrade schools in Malaybalay City are located in areas accessible by motorcycle or four-wheel-drive vehicles. Schools were selected using predetermined criteria to ensure representation of multigrade teaching experiences across different locations. All selected schools had been operating multigrade classes for several years, providing an appropriate context for examining instructional and professional experiences.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were six purposively selected multigrade teachers from different districts within the Division of Malaybalay City. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: they must have at least three years of experience teaching multigrade classes, be officially employed in public elementary schools, and voluntarily provide informed consent. The respondents were predominantly female and married, with ages ranging from 31 to 59 years old. Their teaching experience ranged from three years and above. Professional ranks included Teacher I, Teacher III, and Master Teacher I. Two participants had completed master's degrees, while the others had earned master's units, indicating strong professional qualifications. Most respondents had attended several multigrade-related trainings and professional development activities, particularly in multigrade teaching practices. Their varied professional experiences, educational backgrounds, and training participation provided substantial insights into the instructional and professional realities of multigrade teaching.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who possessed direct and relevant experience in multigrade teaching. The six multigrade teachers were chosen based on teaching experience, availability, and willingness to participate in the study. Inclusion criteria covered public elementary teachers in Malaybalay City who had handled multigrade classes for at least three years and had voluntarily agreed to participate. Excluded from the study were school heads, principals, assistant principals, teachers on long-term leave, and individuals who declined participation or did not provide informed

consent. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable or unwilling to continue.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study utilized a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide validated by two multigrade education experts from Bukidnon State University. The instrument consisted of two parts. The first part gathered participants' personal and professional information, while the second part focused on exploring the lived experiences of multigrade teachers. The interview guide was designed to gather in-depth information regarding instructional delivery, classroom management, professional growth, and multigrade teaching challenges. Each participant underwent three interview sessions to ensure comprehensive and accurate responses. Multiple interview sessions allowed clarification of responses, probing of themes, and validation of participants' experiences.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher followed proper data gathering procedures before conducting the study. A formal request letter was secured from the Dean and submitted to the Schools Division Superintendent. After approval, endorsed letters were forwarded to district supervisors and school heads. Formal invitations were then given to selected participants, explaining the study's objectives, procedures, duration, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on teaching experience and willingness to share their experiences. Before the interviews, the researcher-oriented participants regarding the study and encouraged them to answer openly using their preferred language. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the research process. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Each participant was interviewed three times, allowing the researcher to ask probing and follow-up questions that generated richer descriptions of instructional delivery, classroom management, and professional advancement experiences. Interview responses were organized, transcribed, and analyzed thematically following transcendental phenomenological procedures. Data saturation was achieved when recurring themes and similar experiences emerged across participants.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study used manual thematic analysis guided by Clark Moustakas's transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis focused on identifying patterns, meanings, and recurring themes that reflected the shared experiences of multigrade teachers. The first stage involved bracketing, where the researcher consciously set aside personal beliefs and assumptions regarding multigrade teaching to focus on participants' actual experiences. Open coding followed, wherein interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly examined to identify significant words, phrases, and statements. Through horizontalization, all responses were treated equally before similar ideas were grouped into categories and themes. The researcher then organized the data to identify relationships among participants' statements, meaning units, and emerging themes. Validation strategies such as member checking and data triangulation were employed to ensure credibility and accuracy. Participants reviewed their responses and confirmed the researcher's interpretations. The researcher also compared interview responses with field notes to validate recurring themes. Textural descriptions were developed to present participants' experiences using their own narratives, while structural descriptions explained how and why the experiences occurred. Data saturation was reached when no new themes or significant information emerged from repeated interviews.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly observed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and well-being. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, duration, and voluntary nature of the study. They were assured that participation would not affect their professional standing and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning participant codes instead of using real names. Information that could identify participants or their schools was excluded from the final report. All collected data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic purposes. Interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for participants, either face-to-face or through available communication platforms depending on accessibility and preference. Minimal transportation or communication support was provided to participants in remote areas to facilitate participation. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, member checking, and data triangulation. Transferability was established by providing detailed descriptions of participants' contexts. Dependability was ensured through maintaining an organized audit trail of research procedures and analytical decisions, while confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias. A separate written informed consent form was provided to all participants prior to data gathering. Only those who voluntarily agreed and signed the consent form were included in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Instructional Delivery Experiences

3.1.1 Constantly Adjusting Teaching to Meet Diverse Learners in One Classroom

The findings revealed that multigrade teachers continuously modified their instructional approaches to address the diverse learning needs, abilities, and pacing of learners within one classroom. Teachers simplified lessons, re-taught difficult concepts, grouped students according to ability, and designed differentiated activities suitable for fast and slow learners. Participants emphasized that teaching in multigrade settings required flexibility, patience, and constant adjustment of teaching strategies based on learners' immediate responses and comprehension. The results indicate that multigrade instruction demands adaptive and learner-centered teaching practices. Teachers were required to respond immediately to learners' varying academic needs while balancing instruction for multiple grade levels simultaneously. Multigrade teaching requires adaptability to address diverse and emerging learner needs during instruction. Multigrade teachers must possess varied teaching strategies and activities appropriate for learners of different ages and abilities. Similarly, Naparan and Alinsug (2020) highlighted that differentiated instruction and adaptive classroom strategies are essential for effectively managing learners with varying abilities and grade levels. These findings demonstrate that flexibility and responsiveness are critical in sustaining effective instructional delivery in multigrade classrooms.

3.1.2 Experiencing Resource Scarcity while Finding Ways to Sustain Instruction

The findings showed that multigrade teachers experienced shortages in classrooms, instructional materials, and educational resources. Participants described overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and the absence of instructional resources specifically designed for multigrade classes. Teachers reported spending personal resources and additional time preparing lessons and creating improvised materials to sustain classroom instruction. Despite these limitations, they continued to develop localized and recycled instructional materials to support learner engagement. The findings suggest that multigrade teaching in under-resourced schools requires strong resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience. Teachers sustained learning opportunities despite limited facilities and instructional support. Hussain and Akhter (2025) found that educators addressed diverse learner needs through personalized instruction, flexible grouping, and creative assessment strategies. The absence of ready-made instructional materials increases teacher workload and contributes to stress and exhaustion. These findings confirm that multigrade teachers often rely on improvisation and innovation to ensure that learning continues despite resource scarcity.

3.1.3 Juggling Multiple Grade Levels within Limited Time

The findings revealed that teachers experienced difficulty managing multiple grade levels within limited instructional time. Participants shared that the allotted instructional period was insufficient to fully discuss lessons for all grade levels, forcing them to prioritize essential competencies and divide attention among several learner groups. Teachers implemented routines, peer-assisted learning, and independent activities to maximize time and maintain classroom engagement. The findings indicate that time management remains one of the most significant challenges in multigrade instruction. Teachers constantly balanced lesson delivery, classroom management, and learner supervision while handling several grade levels simultaneously. Mixed-age classes often require longer instructional periods to accommodate transitions and differentiated activities. Naparan (2021) also found that multigrade teachers experienced time pressure and instructional strain due to simultaneous teaching responsibilities. Similarly, Kalender and Erdem (2021) emphasized that multigrade teachers often experience exhaustion because of lesson planning, classroom management, and multitasking demands. These studies support the finding that multigrade teaching requires highly organized instructional routines and effective time management strategies.

3.2 Professional Advancement Experiences

3.2.1 Becoming More Confident and Competent through Daily Teaching Experiences

The findings showed that multigrade teachers gradually developed confidence and competence through continuous classroom exposure and teaching experience. Participants explained that they initially struggled with lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional delivery, but repeated teaching experiences helped them improve their teaching practices, time management, and decision-making skills. Teachers also reported becoming more confident in addressing classroom challenges as they gained experience. The results indicate that professional competence in multigrade teaching develops through experience, reflection, and repeated practice. Teachers learned effective strategies through trial and error and gradually strengthened their professional identity and self-confidence. Brecio (2023) emphasized that multigrade teaching requires both pedagogical competence and emotional resilience, which are gradually developed through experience. Likewise, Rondero and Casupanan (2024) found that continuous classroom exposure strengthens teachers' resilience, adaptability, and instructional competence. These findings suggest that daily teaching experiences significantly contribute to teachers' professional growth and self-efficacy.

3.2.2 Continuously Learning and Improving through Trainings and Collaboration with Colleagues

The findings revealed that trainings, seminars, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and collaboration with colleagues significantly contributed to teachers' professional improvement. Participants reported gaining new instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and practical teaching ideas through professional development activities and peer collaboration. Teachers also shared that exchanging experiences and best practices with colleagues provided both professional and emotional support. The findings suggest that collaborative learning and continuous professional development are essential in strengthening multigrade teaching practices. Teachers improved their instructional approaches and confidence through shared learning experiences and support networks. Dontogan et al. (2024) emphasized that professional development and peer collaboration improve teacher preparedness and instructional effectiveness in multigrade settings. Hussain and Akhter (2025) also found that collaboration and specialized training enhance classroom practices and help teachers manage diverse learner needs more effectively. These findings highlight the importance of sustained professional learning opportunities and collaborative support systems for multigrade teachers.

3.3 Strategic Plan for Multigrade Teachers

The findings of the study served as the basis for developing a strategic plan intended to address the instructional and professional challenges experienced by multigrade teachers. The strategic plan focused on improving differentiated instruction, classroom management, instructional resource development, teacher competence, professional collaboration, and institutional support. The proposed plan emphasized strengthening differentiated and learner-centered instruction, increasing access to localized instructional materials, improving classroom and time management practices, and promoting continuous professional development through trainings, mentoring, and Learning Action Cell sessions. The plan also highlighted the importance of administrative support, technical assistance, collaborative leadership, and regular monitoring to improve the effectiveness of multigrade education. The findings indicate that multigrade teachers require sustained institutional support, continuous professional learning, and adequate instructional resources to effectively manage the demands of multigrade teaching. The strategic plan was therefore designed to address the actual instructional realities and professional needs identified in the study while promoting a more responsive and supportive multigrade learning environment.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study revealed that the lived experiences of multigrade teachers are characterized by continuous adaptation, resourcefulness, time management, and professional growth. Teachers constantly modified instructional strategies to address learners' varied needs, abilities, and learning paces within one classroom. Despite limited instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, and time constraints, teachers sustained instruction through creativity, improvisation, and flexible classroom management. The findings also showed that repeated teaching experiences strengthened teachers' confidence, competence, resilience, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, participation in trainings, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and collaboration with colleagues contributed significantly to their professional advancement and instructional improvement. Overall, multigrade teaching emerged as a continuous process of learning, adjustment, collaboration, and commitment to providing inclusive and meaningful learning opportunities for all learners.

Multigrade teachers should continue strengthening their adaptability, reflective practice, and instructional creativity by developing localized materials and participating in professional development activities, trainings, and collaborative learning opportunities. School heads and administrators should enhance instructional supervision, technical support, and classroom assistance to help teachers manage time, instructional delivery, and multigrade classroom challenges effectively. The Department of Education and community stakeholders should improve the provision of classrooms, instructional materials, and learning resources to support multigrade instruction, particularly in remote and underserved schools. In addition, future researchers may further explore learner outcomes, instructional strategies, leadership practices, workload management, and teacher well-being in multigrade education to strengthen policy development and educational improvement initiatives.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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