VOICES FROM AFAR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT NEEDS IN TEACHING MULTI-GRADE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the lived experiences, challenges encountered, and support needs of teachers in teaching multi-grade classes, uncovering pivotal themes that influence teaching effectiveness and student learning. Through qualitative analysis, three principal themes emerged: Utilizing Technology, Resourcefulness and Preparation, and Diverse Pedagogical Approaches, underscoring the necessity for adaptability, technological adeptness, and innovative teaching methods to cater to the diverse learning needs within multi-grade settings. Additionally, the study identified critical challenges and support requirements, highlighting the need for comprehensive support and resources to enable teachers to navigate the complexities of multi-grade teaching successfully.

The conclusions drawn from the study emphasize the multifaceted nature of teaching in multi-grade classrooms and the imperative for strategic support mechanisms. To address these insights, the study recommends two-fold actions targeting both educational practitioners and policymakers. For school administrators, an investment in educational technology and the facilitation of collaborative teacher networks are paramount. Teachers are encouraged to pursue continuous professional development and to implement collaborative learning strategies to foster a supportive and dynamic learning environment. Furthermore, the study suggests that future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of these interventions and explore the integration of technology in multi-grade classrooms more deeply. The study's findings contribute valuable perspectives to the discourse on multi-grade teaching, proposing actionable strategies to enhance teaching efficacy and student engagement in such settings.

Keywords: *Multi-Grade Teaching, Technology in Education, Resourcefulness, Collaborative Learning, Pedagogical Strategies, Qualitative Approach, Arakan District North Cotabato*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, multigrade teachers encounter various external challenges, including distance, limited resources, safety concerns during commutes, heavy workloads, and student absenteeism. Berry (2020), noted a report in his study that almost 86% of the

multigrade teachers experienced social isolation, which is a common issue in remote multigrade schools and is exacerbated by resource shortages, infrequent supervision, and poor living conditions. Multigrade teachers also face challenges related to student reading difficulties and inadequate access to books, stationery, educational materials, warm clothing, and nourishment (Aryal, P. 2022).

Similarly, examining the unique problems faced by teachers in multigrade classes in remote parts of India, Africa, and the Philippines, where educational resources are limited, and infrastructure is basic and crucial. It's also important to see how local communities, parents, and non-profit organizations support these teachers and improve education in such areas. Additionally, exploring the use of technology, distance learning, and creative teaching methods to address the challenges in these remote regions is essential (Okamoto & Potane, 2020).

Conversely, the Department of Education (DepEd) best supports teachers in remote areas handling multigrade classes, it's essential to provide them with specialized training and professional development programs. These programs equip educators with the necessary skills to teach multigrade classes effectively. Additionally, curricula should be made flexible or adapted to cater to the diverse needs of students in such classrooms. To address the common issue of teacher isolation in remote regions, implementing measures like virtual networks and support systems can help connect educators, fostering a sense of community and shared expertise (DepED Order No. 96, s. 2019).

In the local context, especially in the remote area in Arakan Valley, Multigrade teaching in remote areas ensures access, cost-effectiveness, customized learning, and community engagement, supporting education's sustainability and inclusivity. However, teachers found limited resources, teacher isolation, curriculum adaptation, and varying student abilities present challenges in effective multigrade teaching in remote areas (Silvana, J. 2023).

However, the challenges faced by multigrade teachers include insufficient support from stakeholders and a lack of curriculum training. Obtaining teachers support can be challenging, despite its importance. Contrary to Beukes, C., G. (2020) emphasis on collaboration, this research finds limited teamwork among stakeholders, especially teachers need support. Teachers are reluctant to teach in multigrade classes due to curriculum adjustments and inadequate teacher training (Dima, G. & Borcos, A. 2022).

Hence, the goal of this study is to determine teachers' challenges in teaching multigrade classes in selected schools in Arakan, North Cotabato for the school year 2023-2024.

Teaching multi-grade classes presents a unique set of challenges and demands a specialized support system for educators. In many rural and remote areas, resources are scarce, and teachers are tasked with instructing students of varying ages and educational levels within the same classroom environment. This scenario requires the development of differentiated learning strategies and the ability to tailor instruction to accommodate a wide spectrum of abilities and learning paces. Furthermore, the preparation of diverse lesson plans and the effective management of classroom dynamics become significantly more complex. Addressing these challenges

necessitates not only adaptive teaching methods but also robust support and resources for teachers to enhance their instructional practices and meet the educational needs of all students effectively.

FRAMEWORK

The theoretical orientation or framework of a study guides how research is conducted, and findings are interpreted. It forms the foundation for understanding the study's objectives, variables, and relationships, influencing the study's direction and methodology. This study drew from various theories to inform its research design and analysis.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of **Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, 1985** has relevance in understanding teachers' challenges and support needs in teaching multigrade classes. SDT focuses on human motivation and highlights three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers in multigrade classrooms may face challenges related to meeting these needs. For instance, they require autonomy to adapt their teaching methods for diverse grade levels, competence to feel effective in their roles, and relatedness to build connections with students of varying ages. Addressing these needs can contribute to teacher well-being and effectiveness. Support systems that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness can enhance their ability to navigate the challenges of multigrade teaching successfully.

Moreover, **Stress and Coping Theory, Richard Lazarus of 1984** is relevant for understanding teachers' challenges and support needs in multigrade classes. Multigrade teaching often presents unique stressors, such as juggling different grade levels and adapting to diverse student needs. Teachers require effective coping strategies to manage these challenges, which may include seeking peer support, time management, and developing resilience. Support systems should acknowledge and address these stressors, offering resources and training to help teachers cope and thrive. By considering stress and coping theories, educators and policymakers can create a more supportive environment that aids teachers in addressing the specific challenges of multigrade teaching successfully.

Furthermore, **Sociocultural Theory,** rooted in the work of Vygotsky, emphasizes the role of social interactions and cultural context in learning. In multigrade classes, teachers face challenges related to creating a collaborative and inclusive learning environment for students of varying ages. Sociocultural theory highlights how peer interactions and community involvement can enhance learning. To address the challenges, support systems should incorporate collaborative and culturally sensitive approaches, encouraging community engagement and sharing of knowledge. This theory underscores the significance of social and cultural factors in shaping teaching practices and support needs in multigrade classrooms, advocating for context-aware and collaborative solutions.

METHODS

Research Design

The Qualitative method was an approach utilized in qualitative research to systematically analyze and uncover deeper meanings and insights from participants' experiences, often through in-depth interviews or other qualitative data sources. Developed by R.A. Colaizzi in 1978, it was characterized by a structured, rigorous process aimed at identifying and extracting significant themes, thereby providing a rich understanding of a specific phenomenon. When this research design was applied to the challenges and support needs of teachers in multi-grade classrooms, researchers would first conduct interviews or gather relevant qualitative data from teachers. These data would then undergo a series of systematic steps, including data transcription, extraction of significant statements, organization into themes, and validation through participant feedback. This process helped researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and specific challenges that teachers encountered in multi-grade settings, such as diverse learning levels, resource constraints, and classroom management issues.

Research Participants

Respondents in this study would be chosen 17 selected multi-grade teachers from selected school in Arakan, North Cotabato through purposive sampling. **Purposive sampling** on the other hand would be used as the sample method. The researcher utilizes his or her own discretion to choose study participants from the general population. This is referred to as purposive or judgment sampling. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which the components chosen for the study are selected based on the researcher's discretion.

Research Instrument

Interviews. In-depth structured interviews and focus group discussions allow exploring individual experiences with multi-grade teaching. By delving into opportunities, challenges, and perceived threats, the researcher can gather rich, personal stories that reveal deeper motivations, anxieties, and unique perspectives on the complexities of multi-grade classes. This qualitative approach helps us understand the "why" behind participants' interactions with the multi-grade class landscape.

Observation. Observational methods involve the researcher immersing themselves in the natural environment of the participants, in this case, the classroom or educational setting, to observe behaviors, interactions, and practices firsthand. This method offers valuable insights into how teachers' life perspectives manifest in their teaching practices and interactions with students, contributing to multi-grade teaching challenges and support needs.

Focus Group Discussion. Facilitating focus group discussions among teachers or educators allows for the collection of multi-grade teaching support needs and challenges within a collective setting. This method encourages dialogue among participants, prompting them to reflect on and discuss their experiences, practices, and

beliefs regarding inclusivity. The dynamic nature of focus groups can also reveal shared experiences, common challenges, and varying strategies for addressing inclusivity in education, providing a rich, multi-voiced understanding of the phenomena under study.

Data Collection

A formal letter was composed to request permission from the Dean of Graduate Studies at Central Mindanao Colleges, followed by obtaining the School District Supervisor's consent, to conduct research within their respective schools. Subsequently, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to teachers teaching Multi-grade classes in Arakan, who then served as respondents for the study. As specified in the instrument, respondents were asked to sign a permission letter on the day of data collection. Participants in this research were limited to just those who provided written permission. Participants were guaranteed that their opinions would be kept confidential and that their identities would not be exposed in any published component of this research. Once the data had been obtained, it was encoded with the correct label. To protect the confidentiality of the responses, the researcher personally administered the questionnaire. The researcher then summarized and tabulated the data before analyzing and interpreting them.

Following participant interviews, the researcher personally collected the data and expressed gratitude for their involvement. In-depth one-on-one interviews, direct participant observations, and focus group discussions were conducted to collect as much direct qualitative information as possible on the thoughts and feelings of participants. This technique was based on a core tenet of qualitative research: the participant's viewpoint on the phenomena of interest should emerge according to the participant's perspective, not the researchers'. Individual engagement and participation were essential throughout the interviewing process (Cresswell, 2017).

The researcher used an informed consent form and accompanying script to discuss the purpose of the study, what it entailed, why they were asked to participate, that participation was voluntary, private, and anonymous, and what would be done with the data they provided. In addition, the interviews were conducted in a distraction-free setting and at convenient times and locations for the participants. The researcher then designed the questionnaire, compiled the data, and evaluated the outcomes. This study then presented its findings, conclusions, and suggestions. Thus, the duration of this study was from January 2024 up to August 2024.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique for analyzing qualitative data. Typically, it refers to a collection of texts, such as a transcript or an interview. To detect recurring themes, the researcher sorts through the data to identify recurring topics, ideas, and meaning patterns. This may need that researcher investigate for correlations between previously identified themes or between observed actions or ideas and respondents' biographical

factors such as age and gender. Consequences for policy issues may be extrapolated from the data, and puzzling findings from previous research can be investigated. In the future, advanced analytic approaches may be employed to generate and test hypotheses. The qualitative analysis process does not use "quick fix" approaches.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Essential Themes that Emerged from the Lived Experiences of Teachers' Pertaining to Multi-grade Classes

In this section presents the Essential Themes that Emerged from the Lived Experiences of Teachers' Pertaining to Multi-grade Classes. It was revealed that there were three (3) themes such as: Utilizing Technology, Resourcefulness and Preparation, and Diverse Pedagogical Approaches.

Theme 1. Utilizing Technology

Most of the participants believed that integrating technology is essential for enhancing the teaching and learning experience in multigrade classrooms. They emphasized how technology facilitates access to diverse educational resources, supports interactive learning, and enables more efficient content delivery across multiple grade levels.

The ideas are supported by Bauer, J., & Kenton, J. (2015) explore the barriers to technology integration in schools in their study published in the Journal of Technology and Teacher Education. They delve into the reasons technology is not more widely utilized within educational settings, highlighting factors such as lack of resources, insufficient training for teachers, and the absence of a supportive school culture towards technology use. The study implies that overcoming these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that include professional development for teachers, investment in technology infrastructure, and a shift in school culture to value and support technology integration. This research aligns with the importance of utilizing technology in teaching, suggesting that addressing these challenges can significantly enhance the teaching and learning process, particularly in multigrade classrooms where technology can serve as a critical tool for differentiation and engagement.

Theme 2. Professional Development and Support

Most of the participants believed that ongoing professional development and support are crucial for multigrade teachers to effectively incorporate diverse pedagogical approaches and technology into their teaching. They emphasized the need for targeted training programs and resources that specifically address the unique challenges of multigrade classrooms, enhancing teachers' skills and confidence in managing these complex teaching environments.

The ideas are supported by Taylor, J. A., Roth, K., Wilson, C. D., Stuhlsatz, M. A., & Tipton, E. (2017) conducted a study on the impact of a professional development program for teachers, which focused on the analysis of practice through video case

studies, and its effect on elementary students' science achievement. Published in the Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, the study demonstrates that targeted professional development, which allows teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and learn from concrete examples, can lead to significant improvements in student achievement. This implies that professional development programs that are carefully designed to address specific teaching challenges and promote reflective practice can enhance teaching effectiveness, particularly in complex teaching settings like multigrade classrooms.

Theme 3. Differentiated Instruction

Most of the participants believed that differentiated instruction is essential in multigrade classrooms to meet the diverse learning needs and abilities of students. They emphasized the importance of tailoring teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate individual learning styles, thereby ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential.

The ideas are supported by Lawrence-Brown, D. (2015) discusses the concept of differentiated instruction as a means to create inclusive, standards-based learning environments that benefit all students, in her work published in American Secondary Education. Lawrence-Brown argues that differentiated instruction allows teachers to meet the diverse needs of students by modifying curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessments. This approach not only accommodates learners with varying abilities and backgrounds but also enhances the overall learning experience for the entire class. The study implies that through differentiated instruction, educators can ensure equitable access to education, thereby fostering a classroom environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed and achieve their full potential. This research supports the necessity of differentiated instruction in multigrade classrooms, where the range of student needs and learning levels is even broader.

Essential Themes That Emerged from Teachers' Challenges and Support Needs in Teaching Multi-Grade Classes

In this section, presents the Essential Themes That Emerged from Teachers' Challenges and Support Needs in Teaching Multi-Grade Classes. There were three (3) that arose from the study such as Multi-Teaching Adaptive Strategies, Resourcefulness and Preparation, and Support Needs.

Theme 1. Multi-Teaching Adaptive Strategies

Most of the participants believed that adopting adaptive teaching strategies is crucial for managing multi-grade classrooms effectively. They highlighted the importance of flexibility, creativity, and the ability to tailor teaching methods to meet the varied needs of students across different grades. This adaptability not only helps in addressing the educational requirements of a diverse group of learners but also in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment where every student can thrive.

Building upon the insights from Naparan, G.B. and Alinsug, V.G. (2021) regarding "Classroom strategies of multigrade teachers," it becomes evident that the concept of multi-teaching adaptive strategies is central to navigating the intricacies of multigrade teaching. This study underlines the unique set of challenges multigrade teachers' encounter, notably in crafting varied lesson plans and addressing the different learning levels within a single classroom setting. It suggests that the essence of successful multigrade teaching lies in the teachers' ability to be highly adaptable and creative. Such educators are proficient in deploying a spectrum of teaching methodologies tailored to meet the diverse educational demands of their pupils effectively.

Theme 2. Resourcefulness and Preparation

Most of the participants believed that being proactive and creatively utilizing available resources are essential for multigrade teaching success. They highlighted the importance of advanced preparation, seeking support from coordinators, and integrating technology to enhance lesson delivery. This combination enables teachers to address the diverse learning needs of their students effectively and efficiently.

The ideas are supported by Sidgi, L. F. S. (2022) explores "The Benefits of using collaborative learning strategy in higher education" in the International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences. The study discusses how collaborative learning strategies enhance student engagement, understanding, and retention of knowledge in higher education settings. It implies that teachers' ability to implement collaborative learning effectively requires significant preparation and resourcefulness to adapt teaching methods to students' needs. Sidgi's research underscores the importance of preparation in facilitating collaborative learning environments that foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students, highlighting that educators' readiness and innovative approach to teaching can significantly impact students' learning outcomes.

Theme 3. Support Needs

Most of the participants believed that multigrade teachers require specific support to address the unique challenges they face, including access to tailored professional development, additional classroom resources, and administrative assistance. They emphasized the importance of receiving support that recognizes the complexity of teaching multiple grade levels simultaneously, ensuring teachers can effectively meet their students' diverse learning needs.

Furthermore, Gregory, A., & Ripski, M. B. (2015) in their article "Adolescent Trust in Teachers: Implications for Behavior in the High School Classroom," published in the School Psychology Review, explore the relationship between student trust in teachers and classroom behavior. The findings indicate that trust in teachers is crucial for creating a positive classroom environment and suggests that teachers need support in developing relationships and classroom management strategies that foster trust. This study implies that teacher support needs extend beyond instructional strategies to include the development of social-emotional competencies that facilitate positive teacher-student relationships. Strengthening these relationships can lead to improved classroom behavior and a more conducive learning environment, underlining the

importance of comprehensive support for teachers that encompasses both pedagogical and relational skills.

Themes that Emerged from the Strategies and Pedagogical Approaches for Teacher Support Needs in Teaching Multi-Grade Classes

In this section, presents the three (3) themes pertaining to the Strategies and Pedagogical Approaches for Teacher Support Needs in Teaching Multi-Grade Classes such as Collaborative and Peer Learning, Diverse Pedagogical Approaches, and Innovative Strategies for Engagement.

Theme 1. Collaborative and Peer Learning

Most of the participants believed that collaborative and peer learning strategies are instrumental in enhancing the learning experience within multigrade classrooms. They emphasized that these approaches foster a sense of community, encourage active participation, and facilitate knowledge sharing among students of different grade levels, thereby supporting a more inclusive and dynamic learning environment.

Furthermore, Arendale D. (2014) delves into the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) model in his study "Understanding the Peer Assisted Learning Model: Student Study Groups in Challenging College Courses," published in the International Journal of Higher Education. Arendale highlights the model's capacity to significantly enhance student learning and performance in challenging academic contexts. The PAL model involves structured study groups led by students who have previously excelled in the course, promoting an interactive and inclusive learning environment. This study suggests that PAL is an effective strategy for improving academic outcomes by facilitating peer teaching and learning, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of study strategies. The implications of this research underscore the potential of peer-assisted learning to transform educational practices, particularly in settings where learners have varied levels of understanding and proficiency.

Theme 2. Diverse Pedagogical Approaches

Most of the participants believed that employing a variety of teaching methods is crucial in addressing the unique learning needs of students in a multigrade classroom. They emphasized the importance of flexibility in instructional strategies, including collaborative learning, technology integration, and creative problem-solving, to engage students effectively and enhance their learning experience across different subjects and grade levels.

The ideas are supported by Hagay, G., & Baram-Tsabari, A. (2015) explore the impact of integrating students' interests into high-school science education in their study published in the Journal of Research in Science Teaching. The research suggests that when teachers align their pedagogical approaches with the interests of their students, it can significantly enhance engagement and motivation in the science classroom. This strategy implies that diverse and student-centered pedagogical methods can lead to a deeper understanding of scientific concepts and a more positive attitude towards learning science. The study highlights the importance of teachers being adaptable and willing to incorporate students' interests into their lesson planning and delivery,

suggesting that such approaches can improve educational outcomes by making learning more relevant and engaging for students.

Theme 3. Innovative Strategies for Engagement

Most of the participants believed that incorporating innovative strategies, such as interactive technology, project-based learning, and personalized education plans, is key to engaging students in multigrade classrooms. They emphasized that these approaches can significantly enhance student interest and participation, fostering a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment that caters to the varied needs and abilities of all students.

The ideas are supported by Davies, L. M. (2018) presented a paper at the annual ICIE Conference in Paris titled "Student Engagement and Purposeful Thought," which explores the significance of engaging students through activities that promote critical thinking and purposeful learning. Davies argues that engagement strategies which stimulate intellectual curiosity can significantly enhance students' learning experiences and outcomes. The study suggests that incorporating thought-provoking tasks and discussions in the classroom encourages deeper understanding and retention of knowledge. This approach is particularly relevant in multigrade settings, where teachers must employ a range of strategies to cater to diverse learning needs and interests, emphasizing the need for innovative methods that foster a culture of thoughtful inquiry and active participation among students of various ages and academic levels.

IMPLICATIONS

In this study, a thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes related to the Lived Experiences of Teachers' Pertaining to Multi-grade Classes: Utilizing Technology, Resourcefulness and Preparation, and Diverse Pedagogical Approaches. Additionally, teachers' challenges and their support needs were encapsulated in three key themes: the inherent Multi-Teaching Adaptive Strategies, the necessity for Resourcefulness and Preparation, and the articulation of specific Support Needs. Further analysis, as indicated in Table 4, highlighted strategies and pedagogical approaches to address these support needs, emphasizing the importance of Collaborative and Peer Learning, Diverse Pedagogical Approaches, and Innovative Strategies for Engagement. These findings underscore the complex nature of teaching multi-grade classes and the critical need for targeted support and strategies to overcome the identified challenges.

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