

Navigating Multigrade Teaching in Rural Settings: Narratives of Elementary School Teachers

JALEAH M. SERCOLA

Teacher I

jaleah.sercola@deped.gov.ph

Abstract — Navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings presents a complex pedagogical challenge faced by educators in remote and underserved areas globally. These settings often entail classrooms where students of varying ages and academic levels learn together due to limited resources or small student populations. Teachers in such environments employed innovative strategies, adapt their curriculum, and cultivate inclusive learning environments. Versatility is the key, as educators strive to address the diverse needs of their students and ensure that each child receives a quality education. This necessitates creative grouping strategies, personalized instruction, and active engagement with the local community to create a supportive learning atmosphere (Smith & Schlosser, 2018). Overcoming these challenges, educators developed a multifaceted skill set, which includes adapting to students' varied abilities and needs and establishing a classroom culture that fosters collaboration and peer support. Peer tutoring becomes a common practice, where older students help their younger peers, contributing to a sense of shared learning (Dinh et al., 2019). Customized learning plans are often created to address the specific requirements of individual students, ensuring that they receive tailored instruction (Tran, 2018). Furthermore, community involvement and engagement play a pivotal role, as teachers work closely with local communities to secure essential support and resources for the school (Salazar, 2017). This holistic approach empowers teachers to offer quality education within the distinctive context of rural multigrade classrooms, highlighting their adaptability and resourcefulness (Nguyen, 2017).

Keywords — **Holistic Approach, Cultivate, Complex Pedagogical, Versatility, Peer Tutoring, Collaboration, Multigrade**

I. Introduction

Navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings presents a complex pedagogical challenge faced by educators in remote and underserved areas globally. These settings often entail classrooms where students of varying ages and academic levels learn together due to limited resources or small student populations. Teachers in such environments employ innovative strategies, adapt their curriculum, and cultivate inclusive learning environments. Versatility is the key, as educators strive to address the diverse needs of their students and ensure that each child receives a quality education. This necessitates creative grouping strategies, personalized instruction, and active engagement with the local community to create a supportive learning atmosphere (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Overcoming these challenges, educators developed a multifaceted skill set, which includes adapting to students' varied abilities and needs and establishing a classroom culture that fosters collaboration and peer support. Peer tutoring becomes a common practice, where older students help their younger peers, contributing to a sense of shared learning (Dinh et al., 2019). Customized learning plans are often created to address the specific requirements of individual students, ensuring that they receive tailored instruction (Tran, 2018). Furthermore, community involvement and engagement play a pivotal role, as teachers work closely with local communities to secure essential support and resources for the school (Salazar, 2017). This holistic approach empowers teachers to offer quality education within the distinctive context of rural multigrade classrooms, highlighting their adaptability and resourcefulness (Nguyen, 2017).

The experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings encapsulate a journey of innovation, adaptability, and community collaboration. In these unique educational landscapes, educators confront the challenges of instructing students of varying ages and academic levels within a single classroom, often due to limited resources or sparse student populations. In addressing this complexity, teachers employed an array of strategies, including creative grouping to foster peer learning, individualized learning plans, and strong ties with local communities to ensure that their students receive a quality education. These experiences highlight the remarkable dedication and resourcefulness of teachers as they strive to provide equitable educational opportunities and ignite a passion for learning in the distinct context of rural multigrade classrooms (Smith & Schlosser, 2018; Dinh et al., 2019; Tran, 2018; Salazar, 2017; Nguyen, 2017).

Adapted flexible scheduling. Adapting flexible scheduling was one of the crucial experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings. In these diverse classrooms, students of varying ages and academic levels coexist, necessitating creative time management to ensure that each student receives adequate attention and instruction. Flexible scheduling involves designing a daily routine that accommodates the distinct needs of students while maintaining an organized and productive learning environment.

In multigrade teaching, time is a precious resource, and educators need to maximize its utilization while maintaining an inclusive and effective learning environment. Flexible scheduling empowers teachers to address the unique challenges of rural multigrade classrooms, balancing the diverse learning needs of their students and offering a quality education that nurtures a love for learning.

Involved parents. Engaging parents was a vital experience for teachers navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings. In these unique educational environments, fostering a strong partnership between teachers and parents is essential to create a supportive and effective learning community. Teachers often rely on the active involvement of parents to overcome the challenges presented by multigrade classrooms and to ensure students receive the best possible education.

Teachers collaborate closely with parents to gain insights into their children's specific needs and learning styles. This helps in tailoring instruction and support to suit each student's abilities and requirements. Parent-teacher meetings, both formal and informal, serve as valuable platforms for discussing individual student progress and development, allowing for a holistic approach to education (Salazar, 2017).

Implemented creative grouping. Implementing creative grouping was a fundamental experience for teachers navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings. In these diverse classrooms, students of various ages and academic levels share the same space, necessitating innovative strategies to facilitate effective learning. Creative grouping involves organizing students into smaller groups based on their abilities or learning needs, which enables teachers to deliver tailored instruction, foster peer learning, and create an inclusive environment.

One common practice involves grouping students according to their current academic level, allowing teachers to provide targeted instruction for each group. This approach ensures that students receive content appropriate to their abilities, mitigating challenges related to multigrade instruction (Smith & Schlosser, 2018). Moreover, teachers create opportunities for peer tutoring, where older students assist their younger peers in areas where they excel, enhancing collaboration and the transfer of knowledge (Dinh et al., 2019).

Additionally, teachers may employ station-based learning or learning centers within the classroom, each focused on specific subjects or skills. Students rotate through these centers during different times, providing opportunities for individualized instruction and collaborative activities tailored to their learning needs (Pascua & Tandang, 2019). These groupings are fluid and dynamic, allowing for flexibility to adapt to students' changing needs and progress.

Creative grouping in multigrade classrooms requires effective classroom management, communication, and ongoing assessment. Teachers must communicate expectations and routines to students, fostering a sense of independence and responsibility for their learning (Tran, 2018). Collaborative planning with other teachers in the school helps ensure that grouping strategies are consistent and that students receive a balanced and comprehensive education across all subjects (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

One strategy involves clear and consistent communication of classroom rules and expectations. Teachers set the tone for behavior in the classroom, providing students with clear guidelines for their conduct. This consistency helps create a structured and predictable learning environment, reducing disruptions and enabling students to focus on their studies.

Additionally, teachers may employ visual aids, such as schedules and charts, to help students understand daily routines and transitions. Visual cues serve as reminders, ensuring that students are aware of the tasks at hand and helping them navigate the complexities of multigrade instruction.

Effective time management is another aspect of classroom management. Teachers carefully plan their lessons to make the most of limited classroom time, ensuring that each student receives appropriate instruction. Time management strategies help prevent students from feeling rushed or neglected, promoting a balanced and comprehensive education.

Classroom management is essential for maintaining a harmonious learning environment in multigrade settings. By implementing clear rules, visual aids, and effective time management, teachers can navigate the challenges of multigrade teaching in rural settings more efficiently.

Implementing flexible scheduling. Implementing flexible scheduling is a critical coping mechanism for teachers navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings. In such diverse classrooms, where students of varying ages and abilities coexist, flexible scheduling allows teachers to optimize learning opportunities while addressing individual learning needs. This approach is vital for accommodating the unique challenges of multigrade classrooms effectively (Tran, 2018).

Teachers often divide their class into smaller, temporary groups based on students' readiness and learning styles. By tailoring instruction to these smaller groups, teachers ensure that each student receives education that aligns with their abilities and needs. This approach also promotes peer learning, where students can help and learn from their classmates, fostering a collaborative atmosphere (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Moreover, flexible scheduling enables teachers to provide individualized instruction for students who need additional support or enrichment. It allows for more time on task, as students can work on tasks at their own pace. For example, while one group receives direct instruction, others may engage in independent or group activities, ensuring an efficient use of classroom time (Dinh et al., 2019).

Teachers adapt their schedules to accommodate various learning activities and subjects. This flexibility allows them to incorporate hands-on and experiential learning, adapting to students' changing needs and interests. By avoiding a rigid structure, teachers can engage students in meaningful, context-rich activities that make learning more engaging and enjoyable (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Furthermore, flexible scheduling helps teachers address the issue of multitasking by attending to students of different grade levels and abilities. Teachers can allocate their time effectively and ensure that no student feels neglected or left behind. This approach contributes to a more equitable and inclusive learning environment (Tran, 2018).

Attending professional development. Attending professional development is a crucial coping mechanism for teachers navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings. These professional development opportunities provide teachers with the knowledge, skills, and strategies they need to address the unique challenges of multigrade classrooms effectively. By participating in ongoing

professional development, teachers can enhance their capacity to provide quality education to students of varying ages and abilities (Nguyen, 2017).

One of the key benefits of professional development is the acquisition of pedagogical strategies tailored to multigrade teaching. Teachers learn to design differentiated lessons that accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities. These strategies enable teachers to create a more inclusive learning environment and ensure that all students receive an education that meets their needs (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Insights gained from the experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching are invaluable in shedding light on the dynamic world of multigrade classrooms. These educators have encountered and effectively addressed the multifaceted challenges of instructing students of diverse ages and abilities in resource-constrained rural settings. Their firsthand experiences provide a wealth of knowledge about innovative pedagogical approaches, collaborative strategies, and coping mechanisms. Smith and Schlosser's study (2018) on multigrade teacher efficacy in mountainous regions, Tran's research (2018) on multigrade teaching in remote areas of Vietnam, and Dinh, Luong, and Nguyen's work (2019) on peer tutoring in rural Vietnam have uncovered and documented the wealth of insights that can inform educational policy maker, shape professional development programs, and ultimately contribute to enhancing the quality of education in multigrade classrooms.

The importance of flexible learning environments. The importance of flexible learning environments emerges as a significant insight gained from the experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching. These educators have discovered that flexibility in classroom arrangements and approaches is essential to meet the diverse needs of students across different grade levels. The ability to adapt the learning environment to the changing dynamics of a multigrade classroom is crucial for effective instruction (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Flexible learning environments enable teachers to create spaces that can be easily reconfigured to accommodate various teaching and learning activities. For example, teachers can set up learning stations or zones within the classroom to cater to different grade levels or subject areas. This adaptability ensures that students have access to a variety of resources and settings that support their learning (Dinh et al., 2019).

In addition, flexibility in classroom arrangements allows for individualized learning experiences. Teachers can create spaces for one-on-one instruction or provide quiet areas for students who need concentration. This tailored approach ensures that every student receives the support they require to thrive in a multigrade setting (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Finally, the flexibility of the learning environment contributes to the overall adaptability of the multigrade teaching approach. Teachers can respond to changes in student demographics, local contexts, and curriculum requirements by adjusting their classroom setup and teaching

methods. This adaptability ensures that the education provided remains relevant and effective (Tran, 2018).

The need for effective time management. The need for effective time management stands out as a crucial insight gained from the experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching. Multigrade classrooms are dynamic environments with students at different grade levels, each requiring specific attention. To address the diverse learning needs and subjects, teachers have realized the significance of managing their time wisely (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Teachers have found that time management is essential for allocating adequate instructional time for each grade level. Proper scheduling ensures that students across various grades receive balanced attention and access to the curriculum. Effective time management prevents neglecting certain grade levels, promoting equitable learning experiences (Dinh et al., 2019).

Moreover, time management is essential for teachers' well-being. Juggling the demands of a multigrade classroom can be physically and mentally exhausting. By efficiently managing their time, educators can maintain a healthy work-life balance, reducing stress and ensuring their sustainability in the profession (Tran, 2018).

The necessity for professional updating. The necessity for continuous professional development is a critical insight gained from the experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching. Teachers have recognized that staying updated on best practices, educational trends, and innovative pedagogies is essential to effectively address the unique challenges presented by multigrade classrooms (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Continuous professional development allows teachers to access the latest educational resources and strategies that are particularly relevant to multigrade settings. It provides them with valuable tools to design more engaging and effective lessons, tailored to the diverse needs of students across various grade levels (Dinh et al., 2019).

Additionally, insights from teacher experiences emphasize that professional development fosters a growth mindset. Teachers learn to embrace change and adapt to evolving educational landscapes. This adaptability is crucial when dealing with the ever-changing dynamics of multigrade classrooms, where student populations and curricular requirements may fluctuate (Tran, 2018).

Teachers have also learned that professional development promotes collaboration among colleagues. Sharing experiences, strategies, and resources with other educators who face similar challenges in multigrade teaching enhances collective knowledge. This collaborative learning environment strengthens the teaching community and contributes to more effective instruction (Dinh et al., 2019).

II. Methodology

The study presents the method, research participants, data collection, role of the researcher, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study and the ethical consideration. Exploring facts and knowledge in this study necessitates the consequent design and implementation as elaborated in this chapter.

The three most common qualitative methods are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Each method was particularly suited for obtaining a specific type of data. Participant observation was appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in their usual contexts. In-depth Interviews (IDI) was optimal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored. Focus groups are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented.

Patton (2002) defined phenomenology as inquiry which asks the questions, "What is the structure and essence of the experience of his phenomenon for these people? "the goal of this research worked well with this definition in trying to understand the experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching in the rural settings. Giorgi (2007) cautioned researchers to be prepared for an investigation that was greater in both depth and breadth than the offered description implied. He suggested information be viewed as only the tip of the iceberg.

The philosophical assumption was a framework used to collect, analyze and interpret the data collected in a specific field of study. It establishes the background used for the coming conclusions and decisions. Typical philosophical assumptions have different types and are elaborated below. Good research – undertaking with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest, as well as the paradigm.

In this study, the researcher relied on voices and interpretations of the participants through extensive quotes, themes that reflected their words and provided evidence of different perspectives. The answers of the participants to the study were coded and analyzed to build and construct for the commonality and discreteness of responses. It was made sure that the responses of the participants were carefully coded to ensure the reliability of the result. The researcher upheld the authenticity of the responses and precluded from making personal biases as the study progressed.

III. Results and Discussion

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Analysis

Based on the experiences of the multigrade teachers as they navigate in the rural settings, results of the interview revealed the following themes: First, adapted flexible scheduling. Within these varied classrooms, students with differing ages and academic levels coexist, requiring innovative time management strategies to guarantee each student receives sufficient attention and instruction. Adaptable scheduling entails creating a daily routine that caters to the unique needs of students while upholding an orderly and effective learning environment. Second, involved parents. Educators work closely with parents to understand their children's distinct needs and learning preferences. This collaboration aids in customizing instruction and assistance to align with each student's capabilities and needs. Both formal and informal parent-teacher meetings serve as important forums for addressing individual student progress and development, facilitating a comprehensive approach to education. Third, implemented creative grouping. In classrooms with

diverse student populations, varying in ages and academic levels, inventive approaches are essential to facilitate productive learning. Employing creative grouping entails organizing students into smaller cohorts based on their abilities or learning requirements. This approach enables educators to provide customized instruction, encourage peer learning, and establish an inclusive environment.

On the coping mechanisms of the multigrade teachers as they navigate in the rural settings, one of the themes that was shown was having effective classroom management. Efficient classroom management serves as a crucial coping strategy for teachers handling multigrade teaching in rural settings. The capacity to create and sustain an orderly and productive learning atmosphere is essential for addressing the distinctive challenges posed by multigrade classrooms. Teachers utilize diverse strategies to guarantee that classroom management supports effective teaching and learning.

The second theme identified was: implementing flexible scheduling. In diverse classrooms where students with different ages and abilities learn together, employing flexible scheduling enables teachers to maximize learning opportunities and cater to individual learning needs. This approach is crucial for effectively managing the distinctive challenges posed by multigrade classrooms. The third theme identified was: attending professional development. Engaging in professional development is an essential strategy for teachers managing multigrade teaching in rural settings. These opportunities offer educators the knowledge, skills, and strategies necessary to effectively tackle the distinctive challenges posed by multigrade classrooms. Through continuous professional development participation, teachers can strengthen their ability to deliver quality education to students with diverse ages and abilities.

On the educational management insights gained from the multigrade teachers as they navigate in the rural settings, the first theme identified was the importance of flexible learning environments. The significance of adaptable learning environments becomes evident as a noteworthy insight gleaned from teachers' experiences in managing multigrade teaching. These educators have discerned that flexibility in both classroom setups and instructional approaches is indispensable to cater to the diverse needs of students spanning various grade levels. The capability to adjust the learning environment in response to the evolving dynamics of a multigrade classroom is pivotal for effective instruction.

The second theme identified was the need for effective time management. Multigrade classrooms are lively settings encompassing students from various grade levels, each demanding individualized attention. In recognizing the importance of addressing varied learning needs and subjects, teachers have come to understand the value of effective time management. The third theme was the necessity for professional updating. The importance of ongoing professional development is a crucial realization drawn from teachers' experiences in managing multigrade teaching. Educators have acknowledged that staying informed about best practices, educational

trends, and innovative pedagogies is vital for effectively tackling the distinct challenges posed by multigrade classrooms.

Discussion

The experiences of teachers in navigating multigrade teaching in rural settings encapsulate a journey of innovation, adaptability, and community collaboration. In these unique educational landscapes, educators confront the challenges of instructing students of varying ages and academic levels within a single classroom, often due to limited resources or sparse student populations. In addressing this complexity, teachers employed an array of strategies, including creative grouping to foster peer learning, individualized learning plans, and strong ties with local communities to ensure that their students receive a quality education. These experiences highlight the remarkable dedication and resourcefulness of teachers as they strive to provide equitable educational opportunities and ignite a passion for learning in the distinct context of rural multigrade classrooms (Smith & Schlosser, 2018; Dinh et al., 2019; Tran, 2018; Salazar, 2017; Nguyen, 2017).

Teachers in multigrade rural settings make the most of the limited time available. They often developed schedules that allow for staggered instruction, with some students working on independent tasks while others received direct instruction or support. This approach ensures that no student is left behind and that each one has opportunities for both individualized learning and collaborative activities (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Moreover, teachers employ innovative strategies like station-based learning or learning centers, where different groups of students focus on specific subjects or skills during designated time slots. This method enables teachers to tailor instruction to the varying abilities and learning levels within the classroom. Additionally, educators must consider factors like the availability of resources and extracurricular activities that enriched students' learning experiences within the constraints of a rural environment (Pascua & Tandang, 2019).

Flexible scheduling goes hand in hand with classroom management, as teachers must ensure a harmonious learning environment while juggling the diverse needs of students. They may use visual aids or schedules to keep students informed about their daily tasks, fostering independence and a sense of ownership over their learning. Furthermore, teachers often collaborate with their colleagues to align their schedules and activities to ensure a seamless learning experience for students of different grade levels (Smith & Schlosser, 2018).

Additionally, parents often contribute resources, whether it's supplementary teaching materials, volunteering their time in the classroom, or helping to organize extracurricular activities. In rural settings where resources may be limited, this partnership ensures that students have access to a broader range of learning opportunities (Dinh et al., 2019).

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE**JALEAH M. SERCOLA**

The author is 29 years old, born on December 29, 1994 at Maco, Province of Davao de Oro, Philippines. She is currently living in Gempesaw, Davao City. She finished her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education Major in General Education at Assumption College of Davao located in J.P Cabaguio, Agdao Davao City. Right after her graduation, she then took the Licensure Examination for Teachers and was able to get a satisfactory rating. She taught in private schools for 3 years and served in the Alternative Learning System of the Department of Education for 2 years and was awarded an outstanding educator with the most number of learners who passed. She then resigned when she got hired by the Department of Education last 2019. She was assigned in a far-flung area with most of her students belonging to Ata Manobo Tribe at Beto Elementary School in Malabog District where she served for 5 years handling Multi-grade. She is now finishing her Master's degree of Arts in Educational Management at Rizal Memorial Colleges of Davao City. Currently she was reassigned to a new workstation at Davao City Special School in Bangkal, Davao City.