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TEACHING MULTIGRADE CLASSES IN THE RURAL PHILIPPINES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the extent of challenges and opportunities encountered by multigrade teachers in a rural elementary school in the Philippines. Using a descriptive research design, data were collected from 32 multigrade teachers across selected districts through a validated and adapted questionnaire. Results revealed that teachers experienced challenges to a moderate extent, particularly in managing diverse learners, handling increased workloads, and coping with limited instructional materials. Conversely, opportunities were reported to a high extent, especially in collaboration with stakeholders, the use of formative assessments, and the implementation of flexible teaching strategies. ANOVA results indicated no significant differences across age, teaching experience, or educational attainment, underscoring the systemic nature of multigrade challenges. The study contributes to the body of discourse on multigrade education and rural pedagogy in the Southeast Asian context by providing empirical evidence from a rural setting. It demonstrates that multigrade challenges are systemic, yet they foster teacher resilience, which in turn generates innovative practices and valuable insights to inform policies aimed at strengthening rural education.

Keywords*: Multigrade Teaching, Instructional Challenges, Teaching Opportunities, Rural Education, Teacher Support*

INTRODUCTION

Education systems in many developing countries face persistent structural challenges, particularly in ensuring both access and quality in remote and disadvantaged areas. One major strategy to address these gaps is the adoption of multigrade classes, where a single teacher manages two or more grade levels simultaneously. This arrangement has become an essential approach to extending learning opportunities, but it also brings unique instructional and managerial challenges that require further scholarly attention (Jurakulovich, 2025).

Numerous initiatives have been introduced to meet the educational needs of children, and one such approach is the multigrade class. A multigrade class typically consists of students from two or three grade levels taught by a single teacher throughout the academic year (Recla & Potane, 2023). Multigrade teaching is widely regarded as a promising educational strategy capable of addressing the diverse needs of many countries (Dontogan et al., 2024). This approach

can enhance the teaching–learning process, combat illiteracy, and contribute to the goal of universal education (Schiano-Phan et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, since 1993, the Department of Education (DepEd) has recognized multigrade education as a pragmatic means of extending educational access to school-age children in geographically isolated, disadvantaged, conflict-affected, and sparsely populated communities. While not without limitations, multigrade education has addressed accessibility challenges in certain areas. However, despite these gains, multigrade teaching in the Philippines has yet to achieve significant improvements, leaving successive generations still in need of quality education (Tarricone et al., 2021).

Teachers are central to the effective delivery of education, particularly in multigrade classrooms commonly found in rural and remote areas. In these contexts, a single teacher instructs students from multiple grade levels within the same classroom, which presents distinct pedagogical and managerial challenges (Minaz et al., 2024; Reyes & Ching, 2024). The instructional complexity of multigrade teaching requires elevated levels of planning, resourcefulness, and adaptability, as educators must address varying developmental levels, learning paces, and curricular content simultaneously. A recurring difficulty arises when upper-grade students lose interest during lessons that revisit familiar content, disrupting both instructional flow and classroom discipline (Arias et al., 2023).

Effective multigrade teaching thus requires well-structured and differentiated instruction. Yet this is often hindered by limited instructional resources, inadequate training, and insufficient funding for essential educational programs (Recla & Potane, 2023). Teachers frequently report being overwhelmed by the workload, which includes preparing multi-level lesson plans, applying flexible classroom management strategies, and producing instructional materials—often from personal funds (Khazaei et al., 2016). These responsibilities are further intensified by the lack of administrative support and professional development programs tailored to multigrade teaching (Questa-Torterolo et al., 2025). Nevertheless, teachers continue to demonstrate resilience and commitment, striving to create meaningful learning environments for their students despite these constraints (Castro et al., 2025; Hakkı Kaya, 2024).

The challenges in multigrade education are multifaceted. A recent study in Apayao by Bagay (2025) found that multigrade teachers face significant challenges in meeting diverse learning needs, coping with scarce resources, and balancing curriculum requirements—all of which complicate instructional delivery and increase workload.

Within these constraints, however, lie opportunities. Multigrade classrooms can serve as incubators for educational innovation and inclusive practices. They foster peer-to-peer learning, empathy, collaboration, and differentiated instruction—competencies that are essential in the 21st century (Butt et al., 2020). Moreover, by promoting inclusivity and access in underserved communities, multigrade teaching contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 on equitable and inclusive quality education (Rad et al., 2022). With adequate support, multigrade classrooms can produce learners who are not only academically capable but also socially responsible and

globally aware (Zickafoose et al., 2024).

Previous international research has consistently highlighted the difficulties of multigrade teaching, including heavy workloads, limited preparation time, and inadequate instructional resources (Girardet, 2018; Hakkı Kaya, 2024; Khazaei et al., 2016). While these works are valuable, they often frame multigrade education through a deficit lens, emphasizing constraints rather than adaptive potential. More recent scholarship has started to acknowledge opportunities for collaboration, peer learning, and differentiated instruction (Nye et al., 2019; Tundreng et al., 2025), yet such insights remain fragmented and underexplored in global discourse.

This study seeks to bridge that gap by offering a more balanced perspective. It not only identifies the systemic challenges inherent in multigrade classrooms but also highlights the opportunities they present for resilience, collaboration, and instructional innovation. Unlike much of the existing literature, the study empirically demonstrates that these challenges cut across teacher demographics, suggesting they are structural rather than individual in nature. By connecting these findings to the broader goal of equitable and inclusive quality education (SDG 4), the study advances international discussions on how multigrade education can function not merely as a stopgap solution for remote areas but as a platform for developing adaptive and innovative pedagogical practices.

Against this backdrop, the present study assessed the challenges and opportunities encountered by multigrade teachers in the Department of Education. Specifically, it investigates the demographic profile of multigrade teachers in terms of age, teaching experience, and educational attainment. It also examines the extent of challenges teachers face in curriculum implementation, classroom management, and addressing learner diversity. At the same time, it explores the opportunities afforded by multigrade teaching, such as professional development, instructional innovation, and community engagement. Additionally, the study examines whether there are significant relationships between challenges and opportunities as perceived by teachers, and whether the extent of challenges varies according to demographic characteristics. The findings are expected to inform policies and programmatic interventions that support multigrade teachers in rural contexts, thereby enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of education in the Philippines.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-comparative research design. The descriptive aspect aimed to present the demographic profile of multigrade teachers and to determine the extent of challenges and opportunities they encountered in teaching multigrade classes. Meanwhile, the comparative component focused on identifying whether there were significant differences in the extent of challenges encountered when teachers were grouped according to their age, number of years in teaching, and highest educational attainment. This

design was appropriate for assessing and comparing naturally occurring conditions in a real-world educational setting without manipulating any variables.

The respondents of the study were the multigrade teachers of elementary schools in the Schools Division of Camiguin. These respondents are currently handling class combinations in delivering instruction during the teaching-learning process.

The researcher employed a modified survey questionnaire to gather the required information and data from the study's respondents. The foundation of this questionnaire was anchored in a study conducted by Rabang and Perez (2021) titled "*Practices and Challenges of School Heads and Teachers in Multigrade Classes in the Division of Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines*." However, the researcher made necessary modifications to tailor it to the current study. The modified instrument underwent rigorous validation and reliability processes to ensure validity and reliability.

The research questions and the variables under investigation guided the construction of the research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, each designed to gather specific information related to the study. Through this carefully designed instrument, the researcher aimed to comprehensively capture the relevant data necessary to analyze the research topic. Part I focused on the respondents' demographic information. Part II and Part III presented the indicators for the extent of challenges encountered and the opportunities in handling multigrade classes.

In order to enhance the survey questionnaire's validity, the researcher engaged the expertise of validation experts, including the Education Program Supervisor, School Principal, and Master Teacher. These experts conducted a thorough review of the revised questionnaire, offering their insights on its content. They assessed each indicator, determining whether it should be retained, modified, or excluded based on their feedback. Their responses guided the decisions concerning the content of the research instrument.

To further ensure the reliability of the research instrument, a pretest and posttest were conducted among 30 non-sample respondents who possessed similar characteristics as the target population but were not included in the actual study. The objective was to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire after it had undergone expert validation. Using the responses from the pretest and posttest, the reliability of the instrument was statistically measured through Cronbach's Alpha. The computed reliability coefficient was 0.89, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the items. This result affirmed that the questionnaire was a dependable tool for gathering accurate and consistent data on the challenges and opportunities encountered by multigrade teachers. The combined process of expert validation and statistical reliability testing strengthened the overall rigor of the instrument and enhanced the credibility of the study's findings.

The data collection process began after securing formal approval from the Schools Division of Camiguin and the respective district offices. Upon receiving the necessary permissions, the researcher personally coordinated with school heads of the identified

multigrade schools to schedule visits for administering the survey. During each school visit, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to the respondents, and they were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. The researcher then distributed printed copies of the validated questionnaire to the multigrade teachers and provided assistance for any clarifications. Respondents were given ample time to complete the instrument to ensure accuracy and thoughtful responses. Once accomplished, the questionnaires were collected immediately to prevent loss or misplacement of data. The researcher then reviewed the responses for completeness before encoding them in a spreadsheet for statistical analysis. This systematic approach ensured reliability and consistency in gathering data across all participating schools.

The data gathered from the validated survey questionnaires were encoded, organized, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, were used to summarize the respondents' demographic profile and to determine the extent of challenges and opportunities encountered in teaching multigrade classes. For the inferential analysis, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine whether there were significant differences in the extent of challenges encountered by multigrade teachers when grouped according to age, number of years in teaching, and highest educational attainment. All statistical computations were processed using appropriate software, and the level of significance was set at 0.05 to determine the threshold for statistical decision-making.

Descriptive equivalents and interpretation was used to interpret the extent of challenges and opportunities encountered among teachers with corresponding numerical values and equivalents with statistical limits.

Table 1 Scoring Procedure in the Extent of Challenges Encountered

Arbitrary Value	Limits	Qualitative Description	Interpretation
4	3.26-4.00	High Extent	Challenges are always encountered
3	2.51-3.25	Moderate Extent	Challenges are sometimes encountered
2	1.76-2.50	Less Extent	Challenges are rarely encountered
1	1.00-1.75	No Extent	Challenges are never encountered

Table 2 Scoring Procedure in the Extent of Opportunities

Arbitrary Value	Limits	Qualitative Description	Interpretation
4	3.26-4.00	High Extent	Opportunity is always experienced
3	2.51-3.25	Moderate Extent	Opportunity is sometimes experienced
2	1.76-2.50	Less Extent	Opportunity is rarely experienced
1	1.00-1.75	No Extent	Opportunity is never experienced

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Respondents

Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, number of years in teaching and highest educational attainment. The demographic profile of the 31 multigrade teacher-respondents reveals that nearly half (48.39%) are in the early middle age group (35–44 years), followed by 38.71% in the late middle age group (45–64 years), and only 12.90% in early adulthood (22–34 years), indicating a generally mature teaching workforce.

In terms of teaching experience, Table 4 shows that the majority (58.06%) belong to (7–18 years), suggesting a seasoned group of educators, while 25.81% are in (4–6 years), and only 16.13% are in the career entry phase (1–3 years).

Regarding educational attainment, Table 5 shows that most respondents (67.74%) have earned units in a master's degree program, while 19.36% hold a complete master's degree, and a small number have either a bachelor's degree or doctoral units (6.45% each), reflecting a well-qualified teaching population with a strong inclination toward graduate studies.

Table 3 Demographic Profile of Respondents by Age

Age (Years)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
22-34 (Early Adulthood)	4	12.90
35-44 (Early Middle Age)	15	48.39
45-64 (Late Middle Age)	12	38.71
Total	31	100.00

Source: Research survey data and analysis, 2024

Table 4 Demographic Profile of Respondents by Number of Years in Teaching (Huberman's Model)

Years in Teaching (Phase)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1-3 (Career entry)	5	16.13
4-6 (Stabilization phase)	8	25.81
7-18 (Stocktaking phase)	18	58.06
Total	31	100.00

Source: Research survey data and analysis, 2024

Table 5 Demographic Profile of Respondents by Highest Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Bachelor's degree	2	6.45
With Master's units	21	67.74
Master's degree	6	19.36
With Doctoral units	2	6.45
Total	31	100.00

Source: Research survey data and analysis, 2024

Extent of the Challenges Encountered in Teaching Multigrade Classes

Table 6 presents the extent of challenges encountered among teachers in teaching multigrade classes. The table reveals that multigrade teachers in the Schools Division of Camiguin encounter challenges to a moderate extent, as evidenced by an overall average weighted mean of 2.99 (SD = 0.56). The most pressing issue identified is the limited time for individualized instruction due to diverse learning levels (M = 3.32), rated as a challenge to a high extent. This supports earlier findings by Reyes & Ching (2024), who emphasized that the simultaneous management of learners from different grade levels often compromises the ability of teachers to provide tailored instruction. Similarly, increased workload in planning and preparation (M = 3.19) and limited availability of suitable educational materials (M = 3.16) were both rated as challenges to a moderate extent, reinforcing the claim by Questa-Torterolo (2025) that the lack of multigrade-specific resources exacerbates the burden on teachers, who must adapt or create materials themselves.

Table 6 Extent of Challenges Encountered in Teaching Multigrade Classes (N=31)

Indicators	Mean	Qualitative Description
Limited time for individualized instruction due to diverse learning levels.	3.32	High Extent
Increased workload for teachers in planning and preparation.	3.19	Moderate Extent
Limited availability of educational materials suitable for all grades.	3.16	Moderate Extent
Challenges in maintaining student engagement across various age groups.	3.03	Moderate Extent
Struggle to address varied academic needs within a single lesson.	2.97	Moderate Extent
Potential for gaps in curriculum coverage for each grade level.	2.90	Moderate Extent
Potential for disruptions due to differing behaviour expectations.	2.90	Moderate Extent
Difficulty in assessing student progress accurately across multiple grades.	2.87	Moderate Extent
Difficulty in managing classroom activities catering to different grade levels.	2.84	Moderate Extent
Limited opportunities for peer interaction within the same grade level.	2.74	Moderate Extent
Total Average Weighted Mean	2.99	Moderate Extent
Standard Deviation	0.56	

Source: Research survey data, 2024

Other notable challenges include maintaining student engagement across age groups (M = 3.03) and addressing varied academic needs within a single lesson (M = 2.97), aligning with the findings of Recla (2023), who noted that the cognitive and developmental variability in multigrade settings places additional strain on instructional strategies. Furthermore, the struggle to cover the curriculum adequately (M = 2.90) and to manage behavioral expectations (M = 2.90)

underscore the organizational and classroom management difficulties highlighted in the work of Tiernan, et al., (2020), who described these aspects as persistent barriers to effective multigrade instruction.

Interestingly, the lowest-rated challenge was the limited opportunity for peer interaction within the same grade level (M = 2.74), suggesting that teachers may have developed adaptive strategies to promote collaboration across grades. This finding may partially contradict Ronksley-Pavia (2019), who argued that multigrade settings inherently limit peer learning due to mismatched academic levels.

Generally, while the extent of challenges is not rated as severe, the findings underscore the need for institutional support, specialized training, and appropriate resource allocation to ease the instructional load of multigrade teachers.

Extent of the Opportunities Observed in Teaching Multigrade Classes

Table 7 presents the extent of opportunities observed by multigrade teachers in the Schools Division of Camiguin, revealing a high extent overall (Mean = 3.46, SD = 0.34). Among the ten indicators, the most prominent opportunity was the collaboration with colleagues, parents, and community members (M = 3.71), which aligns with the findings of Mataboge (2024), who emphasized the importance of strong community engagement in sustaining multigrade education, especially in rural settings where resources are limited. This collaborative approach not only supports instructional delivery but also strengthens the socio-emotional environment of the classroom.

Teachers also reported significant opportunities in using formative assessments (M = 3.65) and adapting curriculum materials (M = 3.58), supporting the conclusions of Dikwanyane (2025), who asserted that multigrade classrooms naturally foster instructional differentiation and continuous assessment, enabling more personalized learning pathways. The high mean scores on encouraging interdisciplinary connections (M = 3.55) and implementing technology tools (M = 3.45) suggest that teachers in multigrade settings are able to innovate pedagogically. These findings are consistent with Tundreng et al., (2025), who noted that multigrade settings promote creative instructional methods, including integrated and thematic teaching, which enhance learner engagement and comprehension.

Additionally, the study shows that multigrade teaching fosters mentoring among students (M = 3.42) and peer teaching/cooperative learning (M = 3.39), reflecting the social learning advantages discussed by Nye et al., (2019), who found that heterogeneous grouping encourages leadership, responsibility, and collaboration among learners. These dynamics are further supported by the use of flexible grouping strategies (M = 3.42), which allow for targeted interventions across skill levels.

Although all indicators scored relatively high, tailoring lessons (M = 3.23) and incorporating project-based learning (M = 3.23) were rated to a moderate extent, suggesting that while differentiation is acknowledged as an opportunity, it remains a challenging task in practice,

possibly due to time constraints or limited training. This nuanced finding corroborates Hajis & Othman, (2024)., who noted that while multigrade teachers often recognize the potential for student-centered learning, implementing it effectively across diverse grade levels requires specialized support.

The results of this study affirm that multigrade teaching, despite its challenges, provides rich opportunities for pedagogical innovation, collaborative engagement, and holistic student development. These findings mirror earlier studies and emphasize the value of leveraging the multigrade model not only as a necessity in remote areas but also as a platform for meaningful, differentiated education.

Table 7 The extent of Opportunities Observed in Teaching Multigrade Classes (N=31)

Indicators	Mean	Qualitative Description
Collaborates with colleagues, parents, and community members to support the educational needs of multigrade classrooms.	3.71	High Extent
Utilizes formative assessment techniques to monitor student progress and adjust instruction accordingly.	3.65	High Extent
Adapts curriculum materials to ensure alignment with the learning objectives of each grade level.	3.58	High Extent
Encourages interdisciplinary connections to deepen understanding and promote holistic learning.	3.55	High Extent
Implements technology tools to enhance learning experiences and facilitate self-paced learning.	3.45	High Extent
Fosters a supportive and collaborative classroom environment where older students mentor younger ones.	3.42	High Extent
Utilizes flexible grouping strategies to address varying skill levels within the class.	3.42	High Extent
Provides opportunities for peer teaching and cooperative learning among students of different ages.	3.39	High Extent
Tailors lessons to meet the diverse needs of students across different grade levels.	3.23	Moderate Extent
Incorporates project-based learning activities that allow for differentiation and individualized instruction.	3.23	Moderate Extent
Total Average Weighted Mean	3.46	High Extent
Standard Deviation	0.34	

Source: Research survey data and analysis, 2024

Comparison of Multigrade Challenges by Teacher Demographics

Table 8 reflects the assumptions that the data on the variables were compared in 3 or more groups, equal options of a 4-point Likert Scale on the quantitative dependent variable (extent of challenges encountered), and scores are normally distributed, which really fit the requirements in the utilization of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results in Table 6 indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in the extent of challenges encountered in teaching multigrade classes when respondents are grouped according to age ($F = 0.88$, $p = 0.42 < F\text{-crit} = 3.34$), number of years in teaching ($F = 0.16$, $p = 0.85 < F\text{-crit} = 3.34$), and highest educational attainment ($F = 0.47$, $p = 0.88 < F\text{-crit} = 2.96$). These findings suggest that the challenges of teaching multigrade classes are uniformly experienced, regardless of the demographic variations among teachers.

This result corroborates the study of Hu (2024), who emphasized that structural constraints such as lack of time, resources, and curriculum differentiation affect multigrade teachers across experience levels and qualifications. Similarly, Girardet (2018) found that challenges in classroom management, instructional planning, and meeting varied learner needs are consistent across teachers of differing ages and professional backgrounds. The lack of significant variation may also reflect the systemic nature of multigrade issues, suggesting that the difficulties arise not primarily from individual teacher characteristics, but from the multigrade structure itself.

In addition, these findings imply that even well-experienced or highly educated teachers are not exempt from the inherent complexities of multigrade teaching, reinforcing Recla (2023) argument that professional development and context-specific support are more critical than tenure or degree level in managing multigrade challenges effectively. Therefore, interventions aimed at improving multigrade teaching conditions should be universal and inclusive, rather than segmented by demographic categories.

Table 8 ANOVA Results on the Difference in the Extent of Challenges Encountered in Teaching Multigrade Classes

Variable	F	P-value	F-crit	Decision
Age	0.88	0.42	3.34	Not Significant
Number of Years in Teaching	0.16	0.85	3.34	Not Significant
Highest Educational Attainment	0.88	0.47	2.96	Not Significant

Source: Research survey data and analysis, 2024

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that multigrade teachers in the Schools Division of Camiguin encounter challenges to a moderate extent, particularly in managing diverse learners within limited instructional time, increased workload in lesson preparation, and limited access to appropriate learning materials. Despite these constraints, teachers also experienced opportunities to a high extent, such as collaboration with stakeholders, effective use of formative assessments, and the implementation of flexible and innovative teaching strategies. These opportunities highlight the adaptive capacity and professional commitment of multigrade teachers to deliver quality education across multiple grade levels. The analysis also showed no

significant differences in the extent of challenges encountered when teachers were grouped according to age, number of years in teaching, and highest educational attainment, indicating that the multigrade challenges are systemic and commonly experienced regardless of teacher profile. The study also found out that several difficulties previously described in literature as shortcomings of multigrade teaching have, in practice, been transformed into opportunities for growth, innovation, and collaboration because of the resilience of teachers. This balanced perspective underscores that multigrade education is not only a site of constraint but also of strength. The study thus advances knowledge in rural pedagogy by reframing multigrade teaching as both a challenge and an opportunity, and provides policy-relevant insights for strengthening support systems that enable teachers to sustain quality education in geographically isolated schools.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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