

Adapting to Change: Teachers' Lived Experiences in Multigrade Settings Amid Curriculum Reforms for Equitable Education

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum reforms play a vital role in improving educational quality and ensuring that teaching practices remain responsive to learners' evolving needs. The study investigated the lived experiences of public-school teachers navigating multigrade classrooms amid curriculum reforms. Conducted in selected public schools within the Division of Oroquieta City. The study involved 10 purposively selected teachers who met specific inclusion criteria. Using a single semi-structured interview guide, the study collected detailed narratives on teachers' experiences, which were analyzed through Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method. There were five emerging themes identified in the study, namely: physical and emotional strain in navigating multigrade teaching amid curriculum reforms; classroom space as a dynamic enabler of multigrade teaching and curriculum adaptation; experiencing professional growth and fulfillment through student-centered adaptation; supportive relationship as a key influence in teachers' adaptation to curriculum reforms; and instructional resources as catalysts for adaptation and creativity in multigrade teaching. The interplay of physical and emotional demands, flexible use of space, student-centered practices, supportive relationships, and creative access to instructional resources shapes teachers' effective adaptation to curriculum reforms in multigrade classrooms. Schools and education stakeholders may strengthen the implementation of curriculum reforms in multigrade settings by providing sustained professional and wellness support for teachers.

Keywords: curriculum reforms; instructional adaptation; multigrade teaching; phenomenological study; teachers' lived experiences

INTRODUCTION

The constantly evolving educational landscape worldwide necessitates recurring curriculum changes to enhance learning outcomes and promote inclusive access to quality education (Chand, 2024; Sathya, 2026). In the Philippines, the Department of Education implemented various curricular changes due to global education practices and domestic socio-economic concerns (Carvajal, 2025). These are the 2002 Basic Education Curriculum, the K to 12 Program launched in 2013, and the present MATATAG curriculum implemented in 2023, all aimed at improving holistic growth, competency-based education, and global competitiveness. However, the implementation of such reforms is often coupled with significant challenges, particularly for educators teaching multigrade classes wherein multiple grade levels are taught simultaneously. Teachers have to rapidly adapt teaching procedures and materials to the new policy, a challenge that is not easy to undertake without assistance (Dülger et al., 2025; Fitrianto, 2024). Recognizing these challenges is crucial for providing equal support to students and teachers through effective reform.

Multigrade classes inherently come with added challenges such as managing diverse learning needs, limited resources, and many students within limited time pockets (Bano et al., 2025; Maquiling, 2024; Siregar, 2025). In the Philippine setting, multigrade teaching is practiced primarily in geographically hard-to-reach and resource-poor areas where few students need to be taught by their teachers two or more grade levels at a time in one room. Instructors may also have difficulty providing differentiated instruction across multiple grade levels simultaneously, a task made even more difficult by the introduction of new curriculum standards (Ab Hajis & Othman, 2024; Goyibova et al., 2025; Rahmaniar et al., 2024).

During the implementation of reforms, these challenges are exacerbated because teachers must adjust their lesson plans, assessment methods, and instructional methods to accommodate the new learning objectives (Astuti et al., 2024; Muslimah & Sukartono, 2025). Poor opportunities for comprehensive professional growth and instructional materials explicitly created for multigrade classrooms also restrict their ability to apply these reforms effectively (Abril, 2025; Reyes & Ching, 2024). These aggregating problems can lead to increased levels of stress and frustration among teachers, which in turn affect learner learning, performance, and the overall quality of education.

Further, education reforms today too assume too easily that teachers possess the ability and resources required to make easy adjustments, often overlooking the realities felt by teachers in rural or disadvantaged communities (Njinuwo, 2024; Shambare & Jita, 2025). This deficit comes to the forefront, especially in multigrade contexts, where one teacher must apply the same changes intended for a single large classroom with no other structural support. Insufficient support infrastructure, inadequate training, and insufficient instructional resources in multigrade settings explain differences in teaching practices and students' experiences (Dontogan et al., 2024; Rayas et al., 2025). Following the identification of such challenges, there continues to be limited research exclusively focused on teachers' individual experiences, strategies, and perceptions when shifting towards new curriculum standards in such complex contexts. This gap must be addressed to develop policies and supportive frameworks that are responsive to teachers' needs under adversity in the context of reforms.

While earlier research acknowledges the significance of teacher professional development and resource support in curricular reform, most consider mainly systemic and policy concerns, giving little attention to the vital issue of teachers' lived experiences in multigrade classrooms (Bojos et al., 2025; Reyes & Ching, 2024). This thematic void restricts knowledge of how reforms get translated into classroom realities, especially with regard to teachers' coping, challenges, and resilience in dealing with diverse student needs in multigrade settings. Without understanding these individual and professional experiences, stakeholders are deprived of the essential insights needed to develop interventions that effectively reduce teacher workload and enhance equity in learning conditions. Examination of these thematic dimensions is thus necessary to determine whether or not curriculum reforms are indeed responsive, sustainable, and accurate to the intricate realities of classroom-level teachers.

Camsa (2025) observes that the challenges faced by multigrade class teachers during curriculum reforms in the Philippines are often exaggerated due to inadequate support and resources. This becomes clear when programs like K to 12 or MATATAG are implemented without considering the specific contexts of multigrade learning, forcing teachers to adapt mainstream resources for multi-level teaching with minimal support. The study highlights that although reforms aim at improving the quality and accessibility of education, sometimes they fail to consider the special needs of teachers in blended settings, with the consequence that implementation becomes difficult. Camsa (2025) also highlights the critical gap in the literature regarding the actual impact of these changes on teachers' workload, teaching practices, and, ultimately, student learning outcomes in multigrade settings. A great deal of the current literature is still focused on systemic or policy studies. Therefore, there is a critical need for empirical data that captures teachers' own experiences and everyday practices across these times of change.

To complement Camsa's (2025) study, this research investigates teachers' problems in Philippine multigrade classrooms within the context of the current curriculum reforms launched by the Department of Education. It seeks to capture teachers' coping mechanisms, beliefs, and the help they need to understand their experiences amid this period of change. Focusing on the frontline realities of teachers, the research addresses the cited gap in the literature and offers actionable recommendations for policymakers and teachers. The study is expected to inform the development of needs-based interventions and resource inputs aligned with teachers' capacities, and to facilitate the practical implementation of curriculum reforms. Finally, this study seeks to contribute to the broader vision of achieving truly equitable and inclusive education for all Filipino learners, especially in multigrade settings.

METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of public school teachers implementing the Department of Education's curriculum reforms in multigrade classroom settings. Conducted in selected public schools within the Division of Oroquieta City, Misamis Occidental, the study

involved 10 purposively selected teachers with direct experience in handling multigrade classes. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, experience-based narratives about instructional strategies, challenges, professional growth, and adaptive practices. The setting and participant selection enabled an in-depth examination of how curriculum reforms were enacted within real classroom contexts, highlighting the influence of school leadership, resources, organizational culture, and institutional readiness on teachers' experiences.

Data collection followed strict ethical and procedural protocols, including approvals from Misamis University, DepEd officials, and the Research Ethics Board. Informed consent, confidentiality, and data privacy were rigorously upheld throughout the process. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method, which involved bracketing, horizontalization, thematic clustering, and the development of textural and structural descriptions. NVivo software supported systematic coding and theme organization, leading to a comprehensive textural-structural synthesis that captured the essence of teachers' experiences. This analytical approach ensured rigor, credibility, and a holistic understanding of how teachers navigated curriculum reforms while sustaining quality and equitable education in multigrade settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified five themes, namely: physical and emotional strain in navigating multigrade teaching amid curriculum reforms; classroom space as a dynamic enabler of multigrade teaching and curriculum adaptation; experiencing professional growth and fulfillment through student-centered adaptation; supportive relationships as a key influence in teachers' adaptation to curriculum reforms; and instructional resources as catalysts for adaptation and creativity in multigrade teaching.

Physical and Emotional Strain in Navigating Multigrade Teaching Amid Curriculum Reforms.

Teachers' experiences in multigrade classrooms reveal that physical fatigue, mental overload, and emotional strain are central challenges intensified by curriculum reforms. Managing multiple grade levels simultaneously requires sustained physical movement, constant supervision, rapid cognitive shifting, and emotional regulation, all of which heighten exhaustion and stress. These demands are compounded by increased accountability, new standards, and limited time and resources, placing pressure on teachers' well-being and instructional capacity. Consistent with existing literature, multigrade teaching is both physically and cognitively taxing, and when coupled with emotional labor, it increases vulnerability to stress and burnout (Little, 2001; Mulkeen, 2005; Berry, 2001; Little, 2006; Mulryan-Kyne, 2007). Research further confirms that prolonged physical and mental strain undermines occupational resilience and instructional effectiveness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Fullan's Change Theory, these findings illustrate how systemic reform demands, when unsupported, can intensify teachers' physical and emotional burdens, underscoring the need for structural and relational support (Vygotsky, 1978; Fullan, 2007).

Classroom Space as a Dynamic Enabler of Multigrade Teaching and Curriculum Adaptation.

Classroom space emerged as a critical pedagogical resource that directly shapes instructional practices and curriculum adaptation in multigrade settings. Flexible layouts, learning stations, and designated activity areas enabled teachers to manage multiple grade levels, facilitate differentiated instruction, and promote student autonomy, even amid space constraints. Despite limited space and furniture, teachers creatively adapted classroom arrangements to support independent, collaborative, and teacher-led activities. These findings align with research showing that intentional classroom design enhances teacher mobility, instructional flexibility, and student engagement, particularly in multigrade contexts (Kariippanon et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2023; İşler, 2022; Naparan & Alinsug, 2021). Studies further emphasize that flexible learning environments support active learning and curriculum responsiveness (Springer et al., 2020). Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, classroom space functions as a mediating tool that supports interaction, scaffolding, and meaningful learning, reinforcing its role as a dynamic enabler rather than a static backdrop (Vygotsky, 1978).

Experiencing Professional Growth and Fulfillment Through Student-Centered Adaptation.

Despite instructional challenges, teachers experienced professional growth and fulfillment as they adopted student-centered strategies in multigrade classrooms. Observing students develop independence, follow routines,

and engage meaningfully in learning signaled successful adaptation to curriculum reforms and reinforced teachers' instructional confidence. These moments of smoother lesson flow and reduced classroom pressure strengthened teachers' sense of competence and professional identity. Research supports that learner-centered practices enhance teacher efficacy, motivation, and job satisfaction by positioning teachers as facilitators of learning rather than sole knowledge providers (Keiler, 2018; Palompon Institute of Technology, 2025; MDPI, 2025). From a sociocultural perspective, teachers' fulfillment reflects effective scaffolding within students' Zone of Proximal Development, where student autonomy serves as evidence of successful mediation and instructional growth (Vygotsky, 1978; Cong-Lem & Daneshfar, 2024; Sablić et al., 2025).

Supportive Relationships as a Key Influence in Teachers' Adaptation to Curriculum Reforms.

Supportive relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators played a vital role in helping teachers navigate curriculum reforms in multigrade classrooms. Trust-based teacher–student relationships fostered engagement, independence, and effective classroom management, while collegial collaboration and administrative guidance provided practical strategies, shared resources, and emotional encouragement. These relational networks reduced isolation, enhanced professional confidence, and facilitated reflective practice. Research confirms that strong professional and social networks enable teachers to interpret reform demands, sustain motivation, and adapt instructional practices more effectively (Chang et al., 2023; Galdames Calderón et al., 2023; Nisar & Maroulis, 2025). Consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Fullan's Change Theory, adaptation to reform is shown to be socially mediated and relational, relying on trust, collaboration, and shared problem-solving rather than individual effort alone (Vygotsky, 1978; Fullan, 2007; McLure & Aldridge, 2023).

Instructional Resources as Catalysts for Adaptation and Creativity in Multigrade Teaching.

Instructional resources whether limited, improvised, or collaboratively shared—served as catalysts for creativity and instructional adaptation in multigrade classrooms. Teachers relied on textbooks, teacher-made materials, visual aids, locally sourced resources, and peer collaboration to address diverse learner needs across grade levels. Although resource scarcity increased preparation demands, it also stimulated innovation, flexibility, and differentiated instruction. Research supports that limited resources can prompt creative problem-solving and professional ingenuity, especially when teachers collaborate and share materials (Brecio, 2023; Jimenez, 2025; Instructional Resources as Catalysts for Adaptation and Creativity in Multigrade Teaching, 2025). Anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, instructional materials function as mediational tools that support scaffolded learning and co-construction of knowledge, reinforcing the role of resourcefulness and collaboration in sustaining effective multigrade teaching (Vygotsky, 1978; Cong-Lem & Daneshfar, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Teachers navigating multigrade classrooms while implementing curriculum reforms experience considerable physical and emotional challenges due to the simultaneous management of multiple grade levels, heightened instructional demands, and increased accountability. Despite these difficulties, teachers demonstrate adaptability by flexibly and resourcefully using classroom space, enabling them to organize learning environments that support differentiated instruction and smooth classroom management. The adoption of student-centered strategies further contributes to teachers' professional growth and fulfillment, as increased student independence and engagement affirm instructional effectiveness and enhance teachers' sense of competence. Moreover, supportive relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators play a vital role in easing the transition to curriculum reforms by providing emotional support, collaboration, and practical guidance. Together, these elements are strengthened by access to and the creative use of instructional resources, which enable innovation and sustain effective teaching practices in complex multigrade classroom settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School administrators are encouraged to provide regular professional development and wellness programs to support teachers in managing the physical and emotional demands of multigrade teaching, including stress management initiatives and support for workload management. School heads and teachers may also optimize classroom layouts by adopting flexible seating arrangements and clearly defined learning zones to promote

smooth transitions and effective differentiated instruction. Teachers are advised to consistently apply student-centered strategies such as collaborative activities and peer learning to enhance student independence and engagement while engaging in reflective instructional practices. In addition, school administrators and teacher leaders should foster a collaborative school culture through mentorship programs, peer support networks, and open communication to strengthen professional guidance and confidence. To further support effective multigrade instruction, teachers and school resource coordinators may collaboratively develop and share improvised, classroom-made, and digital instructional materials that sustain learner engagement and address diverse learning needs. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to examine the long-term effects of multigrade teaching adaptations on student outcomes and teacher professional growth through longitudinal studies that track the evolution of instructional strategies, classroom environments, and resource innovations over time.

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