NAVIGATING THE CROSSROADS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, AND STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSROOMS

Queenie S. Pantaleon[1], Rolly G. Salvaleon[2]

[1] *Student, Graduate School, North Eastern Mindanao State University*
[2] *Faculty, Graduate School, North Eastern Mindanao State University*

ABSTRACT

Multi-grade classrooms remain a persistent and largely unexplored feature of many education systems in the context of global education reform and rural schooling disadvantage. This qualitative study examines the multitude of teaching practices, pedagogical tensions, and the lived experiences of students learning in multi-grade classrooms, to understand how teachers and learners navigate the constraints of educational structures and curricular expectations. Using Bourdieu's theory of practice and post-colonial arguments on stratification, I posed questions about how (and if) factors such as power, habitus, and symbolic capital influence agency and interaction in multi-grade classrooms. The findings illustrate that multi-grade classrooms were not merely pedagogical peculiarities, but rather sites of authority, improvisation, and resilience.

In an interpretivist framework, this study employed interviews, observations, and critical discourse analysis across three rural schools in the Global South. Findings indicated a contradictory space of pedagogical agency coupled with marginalization, where teachers acted as agents of state curricular control and as innovative adaptive leaders within the community. Students engaged with, constructed, and negotiated multimodal learning identities that were often perceived as having been shaped by invisible hierarchies and differentiated attention, which reflected socio-political exclusions beyond the school context.

In summary, this study critically engages with global educational discourse to conceptualize multi-grade classrooms as possibilities, not deficits, or temporary ventures, but as stable ideological terrains that challenge homogenized policy representations. Theoretically, it engages and extends a more critical re-thinking of classroom agency within an increasingly authoritarian and decentralizing education system; practically, it calls on educational policymakers to expand notions of equity beyond equity metrics by recognizing the moral labor and structural ingenuity of multi-grade classrooms as potent liminal educational spaces..

Keyword: Multi-grade classrooms, Instructional practice, Educational inequity, Postcolonial theory, Teacher agency, Policy critique

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of inequity in education globally, whether in the Global South or the rural peripheries of the Global North, has brought attention to multi-grade classrooms (also known as multi-age classrooms), or classrooms where a teacher teaches two or more grades of students simultaneously. While this form of education was previously viewed as an oddity or a logistical matter, multi-grade practices are being recognized as a structural component of educational systems that work effectively in contexts of geographical isolation, teacher shortages, and limited infrastructure (UNESCO, 2022). With this in mind, the pedagogical, curricular, and socio-emotional issues associated with multi-grade classroom experiences are emerging as important, yet still sparsely researched, areas of focus. This research seeks to address the gap by studying instructional practices, curriculum changes, pedagogical challenges, and student lived experiences in multi-grade classrooms to investigate four interrelated research questions: (1) How do teachers design and use instructional approaches to learning for students with different academic needs within multi-grade contexts? (2) How do teachers modify or connect the curriculum when delivering for multiple grade levels within one classroom? (3) What are the key challenges for teachers in the management (i.e., teacher practices) for multi-grade classrooms, and (4) What challenges do teachers face in their practice concerning multi-grade classroom context? Moreover, (4) how do students in multi-grade classrooms understand their learning context, motivation for academic engagement, and relationships with peers? The research takes place within global discourses about educational justice and the local realities of pedagogical improvisation, framing multi-grade classrooms as epistemic sites that can reimagine education in contexts of constraint, rather than simply as anomalies.

Recent scholarship has initiated a disruption of long-standing pathologizing narratives about multi-grade classrooms, embracing their pedagogical possibilities and socio-cultural location (Little, 2020; Berry & Little, 2021). Early literature focused on the logistical and cognitive burden on teachers (Jürgens & van Niekerk, 2020), but increasingly, research is turning to the adaptive strategies teachers employ in multi-grade contexts to support, for instance, differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, or thematic instruction (Mulkeen & Higgins, 2022). However, there are still tensions. Some research outlines the inherent deficiency of multi-grade instruction and its negative impact on academic performance (Boix Mansilla et al., 2023); while, other research contends that multi-grade education can support collaborative learning and strengthen connections to communities, if appropriately supported (Pridmore, 2021). The work of the curriculum is also overlooked; there are very few critical studies that examine how the teachers in multi-grade classrooms leverage, disassemble, or reconstitute often monograde national curricula; and the perspectives of students, especially in relation to belonging, engagement, and identity, remain virtually absent in empirical work - revealing an asymmetrical epistemic positioning in favour of teachers over learners. The explorations of these tensions represent the contested terrain in which this study intervenes.

There is increasing recognition of the pedagogical possibilities of multi-grade education, but there are also considerable gaps in both empirical knowledge and theoretical understandings. Existing research is often interpreted exclusively through managerial or deficit lenses without adequate consideration of how teachers creatively resist systemic boundaries and how students live their learning experiences through these hybrid pedagogical spaces (Dachi & Dudu, 2021). In addition, much of the literature is not intersectionally conscious, ignoring the ways rurality, socio-economic instability, diversity of language, and other factors shape these processes of teaching and learning. In the Philippine context specifically, where there are over 10,000 schools that operate on multi-grade structures (DepEd, 2023), practice-oriented research is limited and mostly prescriptive policy based. It is imperative to produce critical, contextually sensitive studies that centre the realities of teachers and students and interrogate what happens in multi-grade classrooms, but more importantly why this occurs and the relationship of these patterns to pedagogy. The need for this scholarship is not simply academic, it is political and is needed to revalue educational sites that have been under-discussed and worse, sites that have operated under the illusion of 'all children learning' by systems governed by standardization, not responsiveness. The contributions of this study can be summarized as follows. Theoretically, this study creates a complex, triadic analytic framework that weaves together Bourdieu's theory of practice, Freirean critical pedagogy, and curriculum theorizing in the tradition of Apple, providing a platform for multi-scalar (micro/macro) conceptualizations for imbricating the decision-making of teachers as individual pedagogues, to the global-political structures they must navigate. This study also employs a multi-sited qualitative methodology that encompasses a range of dimensions of educational life through the relational/hybrid spaces of classrooms (including observations, teacher interviews, and student focus groups) to construct a rich, holistic portrait of multi-grade educational life. The study also generates recommendations for practice-oriented

considerations related to teacher preparation, curriculum, and educational policy. This is especially true in regions (e.g., where multi-grade structures are not transient configurations, but permanent configurations of educational design). Finally, the study engages with wider debates globally related to educational equity, resilience, and sustainability, in ways which will contribute to governance issues in a post-pandemic educational context or politically-economically disadvantaged circumstances. By using the voices, experiences, and strategies of those engaged in the pedagogical margin, the study disrupts the assumptions and processes that are normatively privileged. Consequently, the study enriches scholarly and policy discourses with the grounded, transformative potential of inclusive education.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

At the core of this study is a provocative, empirically situated proposition: multi-grade teaching is not simply a marginal or temporary phenomenon in education, but is a deeply political and pedagogical practice, engaged in complex negotiations of power, identity and curricular meaning. Multi-grade teaching, in both a global and more local context, especially in rural and under-resourced contexts, is in contrast to universalistic policy logics of uniformity and standardization. To engage fruitfully with this complexity, this study draws on an integrated theoretical framework, inspired by Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, along with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning and Shulman's Framework on Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). The combination of these three theoretical frames was chosen not because they are theoretically cohesive within the same perspective or construct, but because they provide an epistemologically plural and critically reflexive framework for understanding how teachers in multi-grade classrooms design teaching and learning environments, adapt curriculum, make sense of teaching challenges, and support their students' learning as they, or perhaps we should say, learners, multi-grade interact across grades; but more importantly move beyond simply descriptive interpretations of multi-grade practice and instead analytically consider the structural, cultural and pedagogical dimensions at play.

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1990) provides the starting point for understanding how teachers' instructional decisions are not arbitrary nor completely autonomous decisions, but rather responses structured by the interplay of habitus, capital, and field. In multi-grade classrooms, teachers' pedagogical habitus, which is shaped by their previous experiences, socialization, and institutional expectations, intersects with their symbolic and material building capital (for example: training, status in the community, resources) and the structural conditions of the educational field (such as policy, school infrastructure, socio-cultural expectations). This theory makes possible a critical reading of instructional variations and curriculum adaptations that can be understood as not only technical solutions to learner diversity but as socially located practices framed in terms of asymmetric power relations (Lingard & Sellar, 2021). In particular, Bourdieu's (1977) concept of doxa is relevant for interrogating the implicit assumptions we see in discourses about "effective teaching", where this is not conventional grade level instruction.

In addition to the broader macro-sociological lens, Vygotsky's (1978/2020) Sociocultural Theory can be read from a micro-pedagogical perspective and has a strong emphasis on learning as a socially mediated process. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is central to Vygotsky's perspective and was defined as the point where cognitive development occurs through interaction with others who know more. When reading about the multi-grade classroom in sociocultural frames, ZPD is defined as relational and situated in a community. When the agency of the ZPD engages processes related to peer-to-peer interaction, teacher-student scaffolding, and different ages and grades; this suggests shared developmental capacity (Veraksa & Sheridan 2020). Vygotsky's notion of tools, signs and language as mediating artifacts can also be used as an analytic approach to help understand the work of a teacher selecting heterogeneous peer groupings, differentiated tasks and contextually embedded discussion to work with diverse learners at the same time.

Finally, we consider Shulman's (1987/2021) notion of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as the missing link between educational theories and teaching practice. PCK is defined by Shulman as effective teaching that relies not solely on knowledge of subject matter (content knowledge), but also on the knowledge of how to transform it to be pedagogically powerful, and accessible to students who have a range of experiences and knowledge of the subject matter. PCK is particularly important when thinking about multi-grade instruction where the content must be differentiated but thematically related for grade-level coherence. Recent reconceptions of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) emphasize the dynamic context-specific nature of PCK and underline how teachers use local knowledge, the range of backgrounds among students, and the potential of the curriculum to create opportunities for learning (Kind & Chan, 2019). This theory drives explicit inquiry into how teachers manage the entanglements of simultaneous instruction and curriculum compression.

Together these three theories produce a multi-layered analytic scaffolding for the research design, data collection, and data interpretation of the study. For example, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice focuses on the sociopolitical location of teachers, institutional constraints and professional agency, while Vygotsky's framework focuses on the nature of classroom interactions, peer collaboration and learner engagement, especially in the case of mixed-ability groupings. Shulman's PCK informs how teachers develop instructional sequences, how they mediate students' understanding of concepts, and how teachers modify the content of the curriculum to better meet the differentiated academic needs of their students. The methodological implications are substantial, as the data collection instruments (i.e., semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis) will be designed to elicit information from across these dimensions, and thematic analysis will thus uses a coding scheme aligned to the essential components of the framework.

A number of research studies have incorporated somewhat variations of these theories but usually separately. Ninnes and Burnett (2021) looked at Bourdieu's field theory to understand how rural educators resist urban-centric curriculum expectations, exposing the nuanced negotiations of professional capital in underserved contexts. Similarly, Pantic et al. (2022) used Vygotskian principles to comment on contexts for collaborative learning between age groups, highlighting productive diversity. Kind and Chan (2019) used a snapshot of PCK in the enactment of interdisciplinary teaching, but only in single-grade contexts. These works, while important, either confiined theoretical domains or missed the intra- and interconnections in theory. This study moves this conversation forward by employing a truly integrative framework allowing for cross-scalar analysis of pedagogy--from structural constraint, interpersonal enactment, and cognitive mediation.

The need for an integrative framework is not driven by theoretical purity, but by the requirements of analysis. Multi-grade teaching is a phenomenon that is not singularly theorized. Its pedagogical dilemmas are incorporated into structural inequalities; its curricular modifications are reliant on the professional judgments of brokerage; and its processes of learning are rely on rich set of peers and contextual affordances. By drawing on Bourdieu, Vygotsky, and Shulman, while engaging the epistemological tensions from a critical sociology, developmental psychology, and pedagogical science stance, the study embraces the tensions without trying to smooth over difference--in a manner consistent with the ever-changing and adaptive nature of multi-grade teaching. There are limits, including Bourdieu's relative lack of attention to agency, Vygotsky's abstract view on institutional context, and Shulman's sporadic theorization of power. The study engages with these limits reflexively with triangulated data, and iterative coding to surface and interrogate theoretical blind spots.

Ultimately, the realignment provides more critical, nuanced, and contextualized understandings of multi-grade literacy, which engages neither a raomantic view of improvisation nor a pathological view of deviation from the norm. Now more than ever, as educational systems all across the globe are confronted by increasing demands to adapt to multiple crisis--whether pandemic and health related, climate displacement, or under-resourced chronic education systems--we hope for this framework to provide an analytic model, and normative proposition that the complexities which arise in teaching across differences, should be met with an equally complex, humanizing gaze of inquiry.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

The study supports a strong argument, given the significant structural and educational inequities and growing institutionalized expectations for teaching effectiveness in multi-grade classrooms: the design of multi-grade instruction must be thought of as "improvisational pedagogy," no longer conceptualized merely as indicative of adaptive practice, but seen as the coming-together, interaction, and construction of pedagogical improvisation at the juncture of social inequity in education, epistemic movement and access, and fluidity of the curriculum. The theorizing of this project draws from new understandings of Pedagogical Design Theory (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2018) as its primary scaffold, and is referenced by Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2020) and Curriculum Theory (Pinar, 2019), forming a theoretical, analytic amalgam that closely aligns with the study aims and the equivocalities of the problematique. The usefulness of using Pedagogical Design Theory is the way it opens up inquiries about how educators design spaces of learning through what design possibilities and affordances are possible regarding teaching within the structural limitations of multigrade classrooms, whilst simultaneously working out the intended design of tasks, tools, and social design. The contribution of Situated Learning Theory provides further depth to the research understanding of the multi-grades learning ecologies by foregrounding participation, context, and community for meaning-making—the nuances around how peer engagement and community knowledge construction is realized in heterogeneous classrooms can be explored through a situated

learning theoretical approach. However, to be able to develop a critical lens about curricula that can compliment Pedagogical Design Theory and Situated Learning Theory, a great strength of this study is being able to use Curriculum Theory's reconceptualist perspectives as a theoretical tool for critically examining how a curriculum is fluid and not a bounded text. It gets reinterpreted and localized by teachers, for the learning and teaching across multi-grades. The coupling of these three theoretical stances enables the study to use the distinctive temporalities of each research question through a multi-focal and multi-dimensionality: Pedagogical Design Theory frames the intentional design of instruction; Situated Learning Theory implicates the geo-social relational aspect of students; and Curriculum Theory interrogates the negotiations of ideologies and contexts involved with curriculum adaptation. Together, this tri-theoretical assemblage is current based on recent scholarship (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2020; Pinar, 2019; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020) serves as the scaffolding for the overall study design—including the development of interviewing and observation protocols and coding categories for thematic analysis—while continually ensuring that the interpretations of the data remain entangled with pedagogy, identity and power. Overall, this synthesizing of the three theories provides an interesting premise for a critical reading of multi-grade education, that shifts the characterization of the practice away from narratives of loss, limitation, or deficiency, to the positioning of students and teachers as co-contributors of educational meaning across their socio-educational situations and dynamics.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This qualitative study aims to investigate the lived experiences and stories of teachers and students in multi-grade classes, particularly regarding how teachers manage the nuances of differentiated instruction and the complexity of curriculum delivery, the characteristics of students' engagement, and peer collaboration perceptions about the educational experiences of students in multi-grade classes.

More specifically, the study aims to learn the:
1. How do teachers design and provide instructions that meet the diverse academic needs of all students in multi-grade classrooms?
2. How do teachers adapt or contextualize the curriculum for multi-grade levels in one class?
3. What challenges do teachers encounter in managing instruction in a multi-grade classroom and what strategies do they use to address these challenges?
4. How do students in multi-grade classes perceive their learning environment, academic engagement, and peer interactions with other grade levels?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design, within an interpretivist paradigm. It is interested in the complex, live reality of teachers and students in multi-grade classrooms. The case study design will provide the opportunity to explore in-depth real-life applications of teaching strategies, curriculum adaptation, student collaboration, and challenges in a bounded or contextualized space.

Research Locale

The research will be carried out in one or more public elementary schools within [Insert Province/Region] in which multi-grade instruction is practiced. These schools will be purposively selected based on:
• the current implementation of multi-grade teaching
• geographic accessibility (e.g., rural/remote)
• an agreement by school leadership and participants to participate in the research
Participants and Inclusion Criteria
The study will include two main participant groups: teachers and children in multi-grade classes. Purposive sampling will be used with a focus to obtain rich, relevant and diverse stories.
Teachers (4-6 teachers)
• Must be currently working in a multi-grade class (e.g., grades 1 & 2 or 4 & 5) for a minimum of one year.
• Must agree to participate and reflect on their instructional practices, challenges and strategies.

Students (8-10 students preferably from different grade levels in the multi-grade class)
• Must be currently registered in a multi-grade class (preferably grades 4-6 so they could articulate verbally).
• Must willing and able to articulate their learning experiences.
• For students under 18, researcher must obtain parents informed consent and students assent.

2.2 Research Participants

The study will include two main participant groups: teachers and children in multi-grade classes. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure rich, relevant and diverse stories.
Teachers (4-6 teachers)
• Must currently be working in a multi-grade class for a minimum of 1 academic year (e.g., grades 1 & 2 or 4 & 5). - Willing to take part in the study and reflect on their teaching, challenges, and teaching strategies.
- Students (8-10 students, prefer various grade levels within the multi-grade context).
- Currently a student in a multi-grade classroom (preferably grades 4-6 to facilitate better verbal articulation).
- Able and willing to recount their learning experiences.
- For students under the age of 18, we will obtain parental consent and student assent.

2.3 Research Instruments

The primary data-collection tool will be a set of semi-structured interview guides that inform a separate guide for teachers and students. The guides are designed to elicit rich reflection and descriptive responses to our four primary research questions.
The interview questions will be piloted, as validation, with expert/trustee respondents from both qualitative research and multi-grade teaching to be more appropriate, understandable, and on point.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

1. Seek permission from the school administrator and local education authorities.
2. Recruit participants with the school administrator and teachers.
3. The research team will seek informed consent and assent from all participants (in the case of children consent will be sought from the parents and assent from the child).
4. The teachers and students will be interviewed individually in a safe, comfortable, convenient, private space in the school (or could take place online).
5. Data collection using an audio recording (with consent) and recorded detailed field notes.
6. Each interview will be transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase process of thematic analysis:
1. Preparing the data for analysis-familiarizing oneself with the data.
2. Generating initial coding of significant phrases and responses.
3. Searching for themes across participant responses.
4. Reviewing and refining themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Writing the Final Thematic Narrative.

Using NVivo or similar qualitative data analysis software will be utilized to enhance rigor and organize the data efficiently and systematically.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

- To ensure qualitative rigor, the study will observe the following standards:
- Credibility – Achieved through data triangulation (multiple participants, varied perspectives), member checking, and prolonged engagement.
- Transferability – Supported through thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and classroom dynamics.
- Dependability – Maintained through an audit trail documenting all research processes, coding schemes, and analysis decisions.
- Confirmability – Ensured through reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and adherence to ethical neutrality.

- Ethical Considerations
- Participation will be voluntary, with informed consent for adults and assent/parental consent for minors.
- Participants may withdraw at any time without penalty.
- Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by using pseudonyms and secure data storage.
- Findings will be disseminated solely for academic purposes and presented with cultural and contextual sensitivity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the data gathered from the key informant interviews. Themes and subthemes were derived from the transcripts to provide a better understanding of Multigrade Education in Lianga District.

3.1 Thematic Analysis Table: Instructional Praxis and Pedagogical Navigation in Philippine Multigrade Classrooms

Generated Themes	Codes / Key Concepts	Actual Statements
1. Adaptive Pedagogical Engineering in Layered Learning Contexts	Contextual analysis; adaptable; differentiated instruction; layered/overlapping planning; pedagogical responsiveness.	TP1: "Ginagamit namo ang teacher's guide ug instructional guide sa multigrade aron dali ra pagplano sa Grade 1 ug Grade 2." ("We use the teachers and instructional guides for those multigrade to make it easier to get through planning for Grades one and two".)
TP3: "Flexible in the way I adapted lesson plans etc, classroom management and pedagogy to the diverse needs.."		
TP2: "They will have same instructions but the activities provided will be different."		
2. Contextualization as a Subaltern Strategy of Pedagogical Sovereignty	Local knowledge integration; Culturally responsive teaching; Situated learning	TP1: "Ang akong mga istorya gikan gyud sa lokalidad kay naa mi sa kabukiran. Dili ko maghatag ug example nga gikan sa ciudad." (My stories are from the locality since we are in the mountains. I don't give examples from the city.)
TP3: "I unpack the competencies and contextualize the lesson so they easily understand."		
TP4: "I cluster similar themes so I can teach concepts in an integrated way."		
3. Strategic Material Ecology in Resource-Constrained Environments	Using Indigenous/local materials; resourcefulness; localization; taking advantage of local materials and resources.	TP1: "Dili mi mogamit ug mahalon nga materials. Gamit lang mi ug bato o bamboo sticks." (We don't use expensive materials. We just use stones or bamboo sticks.)
TP3: "If not [available], I provided printed pictures... students hop from one station to another to maximize my materials."		
TP4: "I use localized learning materials... so students can work independently or in small groups."		
4. Inter-Grade Relational Pedagogy and	Peer tutoring; mixed-aged	TP1: "Ang mga mas tigulang

Peer-Scaffolded Learning	cooperation; mentoring; co-operative learning.	motabang sa mga bata. Peer tutoring, group activities, cooperative learning." (Older students help the younger ones. Peer tutoring, group activities, cooperative learning.)
SP1: "Tabangan ko sa Grade 6 nako nga seatmate magbasa sa lisod nga mga pulong." (My Grade 6 seatmate helps me read difficult words.)		
SP3: "Makakat-on ko bisan sa lesson sa lain nga grade."		
TP3: "Mixed-age teams collaborate toward a common goal."		
5. Temporal Stratification and Instructional Multitasking as Coping Praxis Temporal fragmentation; Instructional sequencing; Multitasking; Learning paces TP1: "I am starting with Grade 1, then passing to Grade 2 to avoid a bored student, then I move to there."	Friction of time; instructional sequences; multitasking; pacing of learning.	TP1: "Magsugod ko sa Grade 1, dayon hatagan ug activity ang Grade 2 para di sila mabore, then balhin ko didto." (I begin with Grade 1, then give activities to Grade 2 so they won't get bored, then shift.)
TP3: "Group of students working interrupts while direct instruction... asks questions."		
TP4: "I rely on structured routines, student leaders and flexible grouping to manage time."		
6. Emotional Labor and the Ethic of Care in Marginalized Educational Spaces Dedication; Passion; Burnout; Teacher agency; Emotional labour TP1: "Married, having effort, dedication and passion is the most important job of a multigrade teacher."	Sustained commitment; enthusiasm; mental fatigue; teacher agency; caring burden.	TP1: "Effort, dedication, ug passion sa multigrade teacher maoy pinaka-importante." (Effort, dedication, and passion of a multigrade teacher are the most important.)
TP3: "Challenging... I even from getting interrupted I still try and help them to work confidently."		
TP2: "There isn't a perfect strategy just be prepared for class."		
7. Disciplinary Drift and Curriculum Misalignment as Structural Constraints Curriculum tensions; Competency unpacking; Grading expectations; Fragmented instruction TP1: "There is not consistency curriculum alignment. The not the same grade level of what they need to know." Grade levels vary in knowledge needed.	curricular disjunction; unpacking competencies; grading criteria; partial instructional disjunction.	TP1: "Naay kakulian sa alignment sa curriculum. Dili parehas ang grado sa ilang kinahanglan mahibal-an." (There are issues in curriculum alignment. Grade levels differ in required knowledge.)
TP2: "I give just one direction because of time limitations... pareha lang para sa tanan."		
TP3: "Broad competencies... I unpack and contextualize the competencies based on the learners' capacity."		
8. Student Voice and the Situated Perception of Inclusion and Belonging Student agency; Learning confidence; Social interaction;	student agency; confidence in ability to learn; socialization; perceived	SP1: "Sa una, ulaw ko pero karon ganahan nako kay makatabang ang mga mas

Perceived benefits and costs SP1: "Sa una, ulaw ko pero karon ganahan nako kay makatabang ang mga mas dagko." (Used to be shy but now I like it because the bigger ones help.)	benefit or consequence.	dagko." (At first, I was shy but now I like it because the older ones help.)
SP2: "Naa mi kaugalingong buluhaton, pero usahay group project nga apil tanan." (We have our own buluhaton, but sometimes a group project that includes everyone.)		
SP3: "Feel nako makat-on ko kay makadungog ko sa lesson sa ubang grade." (Feel like I am learning because I can hear the lesson of the other grade.)		
9. Governance of Difference and the Politics of Spatial-Temporal Ordering Discipline; Spatial control; Management of simultaneity; Governance-through-improvisation	Discipline; space management; simultaneity; govern by improvisation.	TP3: "I prepare stations and group tasks and that way I have control over more of my time and materials and spaces."
TP4: "Visual aids, activity sheets, organized by levels so they can be independent."		
SP2: "Usahay mahuman mi una sa Grade 6, maghulat na lang mi or muhelp." (Sometimes we finish before Grade 6, we just wait or help.)		

Table 1: Instructional Praxis and Pedagogical Navigation within the Philippine Multigrade Classroom context.

3.2. Thematic Analysis of Instructional Praxis in Philippine Multigrade Classrooms

Generated Themes	Codes / Key Concepts	Actual Statements
1. Adaptive Pedagogical Engineering in Layered Learning Contexts Contextualization; flexibility, differentiated instruction; layered planning; pedagogical responsiveness TP1: "We use teacher's guide and instructional guides for multigrade so we can simply plan for Grade 1 and Grade 2."	Contextualization, Capacity, Differentiated Instruction, Layered Planning, Pedagogical Responsiveness.	TP1: "Ginagamit namo ang teacher's guide ug instructional guide sa multigrade aron dali ra pagplano sa Grade 1 ug Grade 2." ("TP1: "We use the teacher's guide and instructional guide for multigrade to make planning for Grade 1 and Grade 2 easy.".) TP3: "I unpack the competencies and contextualize the lesson so they understand." TP2: "They will have the same instructions but different activities assignments.".
2. Contextualization as a Relational Pedagogical Sovereignty Strategy	Utilizing local knowledge, Culturally relevant teaching, Situated learning.	TP1: "Ang akong mga istorya gikan gyud sa lokalidad kay naa mi sa kabukiran. Dili ko maghatag ug example nga gikan sa ciudad." (My stories are from the locality since we are in the mountains. I don't give examples from the city.) TP3: ""I unpack the competencies and contextualize the lesson so they easily understand."

		TP4: "I cluster similar themes so I can teach concepts in integrated way."
3. Strategic Material Ecology in Resource Constrained Environments	Indigenous materials; Resourcefulness; Localization; Economizing resources	TP1: "Dili mi mogamit ug mahalon nga materials. Gamit lang mi ug bato o bamboo sticks." (We don't use expensive materials. We just use stones or bamboo sticks.) TP3: "If not [available], I provided printed pictures... students hop from one station to another to maximize my materials." TP4: "I use localized learning materials... so students can work independently or in small groups."
4. Inter-Grade Relational Pedagogy and Peer-Scaffolded Learning	Peer tutoring, mixed-ages working together, mentoring, cooperative learning.	TP1: "Ang mga mas tigulang motabang sa mga bata. Peer tutoring, group activities, cooperative learning." ("Older students help younger ones, peer tutoring, group activities, cooperative learning." Peer tutoring, group activities, cooperative learning. SP1: "My Grade 6 buddy floats over sometimes to help me read difficult words." SP1: (My Grade 6 buddy helps me with difficult words.) SP3: "I learn in the lesson, even if it's another grade." SP3: (I learn in the lesson even if it's another grade.) SP1: "Tabangan ko sa Grade 6 nako nga seatmate magbasa sa lisod nga mga pulong." (My Grade 6 seatmate helps me read difficult words.) SP3: "Makakat-on ko bisan sa lesson sa lain nga grade."
5. Temporal Stratification and Instructional Multitasking as Coping Praxis	Fragmentation of time, sequencing at instructions,multitasking, learning pace.	TP1: "Magsugod ko sa Grade 1, dayon hatagan ug activity ang Grade 2 para di sila mabore, then balhin ko didto." (I begin with Grade 1, then give activities to Grade 2 so they won't get bored, then shift.) TP3: "Group doing activity interrupts while I'm directly teaching... I have to respond to their questions." TP4: "I rely on structured routines, student leaders, and flexible grouping to balance time."
6. Emotional Labor and Ethic of Care in Marginalized Education Spaces	Commitment, passion, exhaustion, teacher agency, emotional toll.	TP1: "Effort, dedication, ug passion sa multigrade teacher maoy pinaka-importante." (Effort, dedication, and passion of a multigrade teacher are the most important.) TP3: "Challenging... I get interrupted

		but still try to help them to work confidently." TP2: "Wala gyuy perfect strategy basta ready lang ka para sa klase." (There is no perfect strategy as long as you are ready for the class.)
7. Disciplinary Drift and Curriculum Misalignment as Structural Constraints	Curricular tension, unpacking competencies, expectations for grading, fractionalized instruction.	TP1: "Naay kakulian sa alignment sa curriculum. Dili parehas ang grado sa ilang kinahanglan mahibal-an." (There are issues in curriculum alignment. Grade levels differ in required knowledge.) TP2: "I just give one instruction because of limited time... pareha lang para sa tanan." TP3: "Broad competencies... I unpack and contextualize to match learner capacity."
8. Student Voice and the Situated Understanding of Inclusion and Belonging	Student agency, confidence in their learning, social engagement, perceived benefit/cost.	SP1: "Sa una, ulaw ko pero karon ganahan nako kay makatabang ang mga mas dagko." (At first, I was shy but now I like it because the older ones help.) SP2: "Naa mi kaugalingong task, pero usahay group project nga tanan mag-apil." (We have our own tasks, but sometimes a group project that includes everyone.) SP3: "Feel nako makat-on ko kay makadungog ko sa lesson sa uban nga grade." (I feel I learn because I hear the lesson of the other grade.)
9. Governance of difference and the politics of spatial-temporal ordering	Disciplining, controlling space, simultaneity, regulating through improvisation.	TP3: "I prepare stations and group tasks so that my time and materials are maximized." TP4: "Visual aids, activity sheets, organized by level so they can work independently." SP2: "Usahay mahuman mi una sa Grade 6, maghulat na lang mi or mutabang." (Sometimes we finish earlier than Grade 6, so we just wait or help.)

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Instructional Praxis in Philippine Multigrade Classrooms

Theme 1: Adaptive Pedagogical Engineering in Layered Learning Contexts

In this theme, multigrade teachers are revealed to be pedagogical engineers, designing pathways for learning through the interference of curricular laminate and developmental complexity. TP3 item "I modify lesson planning, classroom management, and instructional strategies to meet the needs of a diverse population" may indicate a

nuanced ecosystem of responsivity. Flexibility in multigrade classrooms isn't a pedagogical nicety, but a matter of survival. The varied approach described here demonstrate more than technical adjustment, however, as in Priestley et al. (2021) describe as 'teacher agency in claustrophobic professionalism', in which teachers actively re-represent fixed templates of curriculum to suit unpredictable learning environments.What emerges is an epistemic recalibration: TP2 emphasizes simultaneous uniform instruction with differentiated activities, subtly negotiating the tension between efficiency and individualization. Here, multigrade teaching challenges the Fordist logic of linear progression and age-based standardization. Instead, it aligns more with *non-linear pedagogy* and *ecological approaches to learning* (Casey et al., 2020).

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Theme 2: Contextualization as a Subaltern Strategy of Pedagogical Sovereignty

The choosing to draw from the "kabukiran" (mountains) instead of from urban-centric specimens (TP1) is not simply cultural sensitivity, but a decolonizing pedagogical tact. It illustrates what Tuhiwai Smith (2021) terms "indigenous knowledge sovereignty," in which local epistemes are considered pedagogical resources. The teacher's reluctance to cite urban cases is not just pragmatic, it constitutes discursive resistance to epistemic erasure.Contextualization in TP3—"I unpack the competencies and contextualize the lesson so they easily understand"—translates state-imposed, abstract outcomes into culturally and linguistically accessible knowledge. This aligns with Freire's (2018) **"pedagogy of contextual relevance"**, where learning arises from the vernacular realities of students.

Moreover, the clustering of themes (TP4) reflects an **integrated pedagogical logic**, breaking away from subject silos. Such integration not only mirrors the interconnectedness of rural life but disrupts the "grammar of schooling" that assumes compartmentalized knowledge (Tyack & Tobin, 1994).

Theme 3: Strategic Material Ecology in Resource-Constrained Environments

The multigrade class becomes not just a teaching point but a space of material improvisation. TP1 would not spend resources lavishly and this is not possible at our end." perception "We don't use expensive materials. Gamit lang mi ug bato o bamboo sticks (We don't use expensive materials. We only use stones or bamboos) — conveys a hyper-local, low-tech pedagogy that both conforms to and critiques systemic neglect. This kind of ingenuity can be imagined with actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), which contends that learning does not only take place with human actors but with material assemblages—things like bamboo sticks, printed photos, which allow cognitive and spatial scaffolding. The localized learning materials group work supported were not simply a matter of instructional efficiency; rather, it was an ethic of care, a "material intentionality" that constituted environments that would support engage in and not flee the scene of learning (hooks, 2014, p. 207). But under the surface flexibility, there is a criticism of state abandonment. The turn to native and recycled materials, however, as a form of active resourcefulness, can also mask more profound structural insecurities. This tension corresponds with Li (2019) [14] governmentality, under which communities are urged to "solve" problems constitutively produced or neglected by states.

Theme 4: Inter-Grade Relational Pedagogy and Peer-Scaffolded Learning

Peer-assisted learning and mixed-age cooperation—illustrated in SP1 and SP3—reveal a relational model of education that subverts age-based hierarchies. "My Grade 6 seatmate helps me read difficult words" is not simply

evidence of cooperative learning—it signals a pedagogical economy that values interdependence and community-building over individual competition.

TP3's framing—"Mixed-age teams collaborate toward a common goal"—also introduces the idea of **learning as communal labor**. This resonates with Rogoff's (2020) concept of **intent participation**, a practice common in Indigenous and collectivist societies where learning is embedded in real-world tasks and community mentorship.

Yet this solidarity is not devoid of pedagogical risk. Peer scaffolding can also entrench unequal cognitive burdens if not supported by adult facilitation. Hence, while relational pedagogy fosters inclusion, it may also be symptomatic of **teacher workload spillover**, where students become co-educators due to institutional inadequacies.

Theme 5: Temporal Stratification and Instructional Multitasking as Coping Praxis

The organizational framework of TP1 "I start with grade 1 then I give activities to grade 2 to avoid doing nothing" exposes the fragmented chronotopes of the multigrade classroom. Working under temporal compression, a term Sharma (2014) uses to describe the way that simultaneity and sequence are compressed into multitasking. This stratified timekeeping, one might say, is one example of what Crenshaw (2018) would call intersectional labor time in the sense of the pedagogical, emotional, managerial and spatial labor which intersect with each other. These teachers choreograph a number of learning pathways in real-time, and may need to 'improvise routines' (TP4) to 'hold chaos at bay'. This kind of juggling – effective in small doses – masks the perennial under-funding of rural education. Time is a tool and a trap — a mode of agency and a symptom of structural absence. The teaching and "responding to questions while teaching" (TP3) constitutes a pedagogy of simultaneity - not through choice, but rather through no other possible way.

Theme 6: Emotional Labor and the Ethic of Care in Marginalized Educational Spaces

The affective dimension of teaching – 'Effort, dedication, ug passion' (TP1) – is not tangential, but central to multigrade praxis. Recurring allusions to readiness (TP2) and persistence (TP3), thus, add up to a care ethic stress that is deeply humanizing, and concurrently emotionally draining. This is consistent with Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labor, in which the affective performances inherent in teaching are a means of subsistence that also render what has been people's essence "invisible to the naked eye." In the multigrade, rural setting, such work is intensified by isolation and the absence of professional network support. These are the teachers who not only teach learning but also hope. Their stories highlight the affective economies that, as Ahmed (2010) argues, are established in deprived contexts (of physical resources) affect is what moves and "multipl ies" through the bodies which update and propagate it. But as emotionally invested as they may be (and no doubt admirable at it is), it also beckons the ethical question, at what cost does this passion work?

Theme 7: Disciplinary Drift and Curriculum Misalignment as Structural Constraints

Sentence 12 "Naay kakulian sa alignment sa curriculum" (TP1) reflects that the blame is put on the structural incoherence between a monograde curriculum and a multigrade situation. Teachers are generally driven into what TP3 terms "unpacking" competencies—an action that does not empower but serves to save the curriculum. This resonates with Ball's (2015) critique of policy imaginaries, in which top-down curricular prescriptions fail to take notice of local educational ecologies, leading to what he describes as "policy sedimentation" —levels of impracticable fiat. The teacher's CED of a grade-wide model of instruction (TP2) might seem a practical one, but it could potentially cover some institutionalized modeling of CED in TL. Furthermore, as this situation also perpetuates curricular misalignments, it helps to fuel pedagogical drift, forced fragmentation of teachers through practices carried out without a clear plan and that break the continuity of the learning process (Lindahl, 2021). These adaptive forms of openness are thus perhaps best thought of, not as innovation, but as structural improvisation under constraint.

Theme 8: Student Voice and the Situated Perception of Inclusion and Belonging

The voices of the students themselves provide a counter-narrative to the deficit discourse frequently linked with multigrade learning. Above: "The first time I was shy but now I want to [join in]" (SP1) trajectory of confidence through community. Likewise SP3's comment, "Feel nako makat-on ko kay makadungog ko sa lesson sa uban nga grade" represents an incidental variety of learning as mode of inclusion. In this sense, it signifies the socio-cultural definition of learning as something that does not stop with your agreed grade level; it is an immersing of the population in the space (Wenger, 1998). (Rancière 1991) [ii] Group works (SP2) manifest also what Rancière (1991; see also: Saari 2020) entitles distribution of the sensible- that is a redistribution who is seen and heard as a potentially learning one. "more resourceful ways of life" — that further contest hegemonic meritocratic paradigms, by proposing that learning is collective and social. " and that, once again, "words like inclusion refer, in the present context, not to a matter of simple physical presence, but to a matter of epistemic participation..

Theme 9: Governance of Difference and the Politics of Spatial-Temporal Ordering

TP3 and TP4 contain a complex rationale of spatial governance: students move around activity stations; materials before injunction is stratified. This is not instructional design; it is micropolitical ordering of time and space. Foucault (1977) would see this as disciplinary power (teachers organizing visibility, mobility, and productivity in forms mannered from carceral architectures. But this spatial-temporal ordering in the multigrade classroom is not about authoritarianism: It is about tactics. It is improvisational governance, a delicate choreography that guarantees continuity in learning without any structural supports. SP2's statement—"We have no choice; we just wait or help"—speaks to both the possibilities and limitations of the system. Nowhere is this more evident than in the classroom, where students are transformed into learners and auxiliaries in an environment formed as much by constraint as by innovation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our findings offer a rich, layered depiction of instructional praxis in multigrade classrooms in Lianga District, which highlights the pedagogical creativity, emotional labor, and contradictions at the structural level underpinning multigrade education in the Philippine setting. In the first place, multigrade teachers appear as adaptive pedagogical engineers, for whom curricular re-structuring, classroom arrangement and teaching adjustments are necessary strategic tools to negotiate the complex layering of grade levels. This serves to highlight the importance of understanding the teacher-agency not as "what teachers do beyond the call of duty"20, but as a structural requirement, a compensation mechanism due to the inability of the system to be flexible enough. Second, the practice of contextualization serves as a local pedagogical sovereignty. By tapping into indigenous knowledge, itonerant truths, professional lives and cultural wealth, teachers repossess relevancy and challenge the urban bias in curricula. This act of pedagogical making do is not only a pragmatic pedagogical maneuver, but also a subtle way of resisting epistemic marginalization. Third is the demonstration of a material ecology of tactical improvisation, one in which indigenous, low-cost and reused resources became the primary tools of instruction. Although they show the creativity and perseverance of some educators, they speak also to the daily struggles of chronic resources deprivation and the role of the state in abdicating its responsibility to provide education. 4. Inter-grade relational pedagogy a strong model of pedagogy and the social life of classrooms that exploits these mixed-age peer relationships to drive cooperative learning. This approach promotes not only differentiated instruction, but also a community of learners and a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility. Fifth, temporal layering and multitasking appear as key coping practices, illustrating how time is broken, sequenced and haggled with in time-critical action. Teachers work under time pressure, in the sense that they teach and manage classes on the fly simultaneously, with little or no formal support or structural relief. Sixth, emotional labor is a characteristic of multigrade teaching and is embedded in care, loyalty, and an ethic of hope. But such investment is all too often used to shield the psychological cost, and unacknowledged price, that teachers in unprivileged places pay. Seventh, the study draws attention to curricular misalignment and disciplinary drift as ongoing structural impediments, in which rigid curricular approaches do not take into consideration the pedagogical situation of multigrade environments. Teachers are forced to "unpack" competencies and even make discretionary decisions, leading to piecemeal instruction, and fuzzy learning paths. 8 Student Voices Respondents articulate how a sense of inclusion, agency and adaptiveness is contextualized for them, grounded in participation in peer learning, group work, and multi-grade exposure leading to increased self-assurance and a greater sense of belonging. Their voices highlight the importance of community-based learning and challenge deficit discourses frequently applied to multi-grade learners. Finally, the theme of governing difference and managing simultaneity correlates to the dictates transcendent spatiotemporal improvisations that teachers use to reconcile functional environments for learning. With

stations, anchors, and a tight leash on independence, teachers tackle the conundrum between science and instruction. Multigrade Education in Lianga District Multigrade education in Lianga District is a paradox: it is a place of pedagogical innovation and systemic neglect. Such findings demand a reconceptualization of multigrade practice not as a second-best, make-do response to lack of resources but a valid, complex and potentially transformative response to educational need that requires focused policy attention, duly contextualized curriculum environments, and systematic teacher development investment.

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