

PREPARATIONS AND PRACTICES OF MULTI-GRADE TEACHERS IN ISABELA CITY SCHOOLS DIVISION, BASILAN

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Abstract: This study examined the multi-grade teachers' preparations and practices in Isabela City Schools Division. A qualitative research design was used through focus group discussion (FGD) participated by 10 multi-grade teachers from different schools within Isabela City Schools Division via purposive sampling. There are six (6) thematic issues adapted from the Department of Education (DepEd) Technical Support to Multi-Grade Program in Philippine Education (TS-MPPE) Survey Instrument. Multi-grade teacher's preparations include creation of teaching-learning materials from indigenous materials, advance planning and scheduling with consultative meeting of different stakeholders, experiential learning and assistance from other teachers, and advance meeting with the parents and some Barangay officials for them to plan incoming activities. Multi-grade teacher's practices cover some integration of IT into resources and facilities, identifying weaknesses of students for proper remedial classes or cross posting of learner's potential and skills, classroom organization and management were based from previous teacher's initiative but effectively observed, mentoring and conducting action research as instructional practices in overcoming different challenges, and revising the assessment tool.

Keywords: Isabela City Schools Division, Multi-grade teacher, Multi-grade program in Philippine Education, preparation, practices, Basilan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Multi-grade teaching is not a new concept in today's educational system, it is an adoptive mechanism in the Philippines to combat insufficiency of teachers, facilities, and classrooms. This mechanism is one of the strategies of the Department of Education (DepEd) to provide access to quality education for all schools in some remote communities. Teachers of multi-grade classes generally have negative perceptions due to diverse challenges which places greater demands. However, some scholars argued the importance of full support to multi-grade setting. In order for the multi-grade classes to be effective, it needs for teacher to be introduced to initial and continuing education courses [12]. In some situation, multi-grade instruction is often considered a better option than mono-grade instructions and hence the government should establish a special unit to support multi-grade classes, and multi-grade settings should be given due status and recognition [5].

The achievement level of learners differs in each standard and in each section and hence teachers in this setting adapt many techniques and approaches to help the learners of different grades in a single classroom. Learner's lack of exposure introduces to different challenges which are consequently exacerbated due to multi-grade classes [9]. Multi-grade teaching is not always easy, but doing it well means that teachers were educating children who otherwise would not be able to go to school and therefore helping them gain the knowledge and skills they need for a more promising future [10]. Good or advance preparations together with innovative but excellent practices may overcome all challenges in teaching multi-grade.

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According to Little in [3], aside from providing access, multi-grade instruction delivers the same kind of education as mono-grade classes and in some cases, improves the effectiveness of educational delivery and contributes to the social development of pupils. Despite of many benefits, multi-grade teaching can also be seen as especially challenging because of the widely varying needs of children of different ages [1].

Using quasi-experimental approach to determine the effectiveness of teachers assigned to multi-grade classrooms on student' achievement, Kirby & Mariano in [2] found out that there is a small and negative effect on student achievement due to lack of preparation and training for teachers to teach in multi-grade settings. The study of Vincent in [11] revealed that there are no differences between multi-grade and mono-grade on student achievements. The fact that teachers play a vital role in providing essential knowledge to the students, practices of teachers in teaching multi-grade classes may enhance student's achievement unequivocally better than the mono-grade.

There are other studies similar that are similar in terms of research design such as the study of Ramrathan & Mzimela in [9] assessing the adaptive skills of multi-grade teachers in two primary schools in the Ndwedwe Circuit, KwaZulu-Natal; the study of Olmak in [8] describing the trainee teachers' views about teaching in multi-grade classes at selected teacher education students in Turkey; the study of Mulaudzi in [7] describing the challenges experienced by multi-grade teachers in implementing the curriculum; the study of Matshoba in [6] focusing on the perceptions of multi-grade teachers with regard to the benefits and challenges of learning and teaching in multi-grade classes using a qualitative approach; and the study of Hry-Belhammer & Hascher in [1] describing the teaching strategies used in multi-grade classes among five small rural primary schools in Austria and Finland.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study primary aimed to identify practices of multi-grade teachers in Isabela City Schools Division. This study employed a phenomenological-qualitative method through FGD via semi-structured guided questionnaire. A qualitative research, framed within an interpretive epistemology study was conducted to produce the empirical evidence on this study.

The participants of the study were the ten (10) multi-grade teachers from different public elementary schools in Isabela City Schools Division offering multi-grade classes (see Table I).

Table I: Distribution of the Multi-Grade Teachers

School District	Population	Sample
West District 2		
Campo Barn Elementary School	3	1
Maulana Primary School	2	1
West District 3		
Makiri Primary School	2	1
Balatanay Elementary School	5	2
Balawatin Elementary School	3	1
North District 1		
Look Jambangan Elementary School	3	1
North District 2		
Masola Elementary School	5	2
Kaumman Ekka Elementary School	2	1
Total	30	10

A random purposive sampling was adopted in selecting the participants, at least one participant was selected from each school comprising of 10 participants for the focus groups discussion (FGD) purposively to meet the criteria of representing different schools.

The qualitative analysis of data was comprised of analysis for similarities and differences, coding and categorizing, and constant comparison [4]. In this study, each respondent was provided with a unique code and their respective responses were categorized according to the thematic issue.

III. FINDINGS

Presentations of findings is ordered according to thematic issue.

Theme 1. On Resources and Facilities

Table II below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the theme on resources and facilities.

Table II: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Resources and Facilities

Issue/Topic	Preparations	Practices
Creating teaching-learning materials	Create teaching-learning materials from indigenous materials or from any available from within the locality	Printed teaching-learning materials or presented at the class
Using available teaching-learning materials	Use the present and previous IMs and supplemented by some indigenous materials	Integration of IT
Insufficiency and outdated materials	Enhance and revise to cope with the present situation	Using gadget or laptop to augment outdated materials
	Replace outdated materials with individual initiatives	Use outdated materials as references
Insufficiency in classroom and facilities	Conduct meetings with parents and other Barangay Officials	Parents and Barangay officials will provide additional or other facilities needed for the multi-grade classes

In creating teaching-learning materials, teachers innovatively create their own materials using indigenous materials as their best practice. In the absence of these indigenous materials, available local materials were being utilized instead. According to Mr. 10:

“In lower grade, Instructional Materials (IMs) is really important and print-outs of these IMs must be visible to the learners.”

If teaching-learning materials is available but sometimes too boring for the learner, teachers prepare additional activities in order for the classes to be active as what Mr. 8 said:

“As a wise teacher, to arouse the children to participate in class discussion or activities, we prepared a common material suited for both two grades but with objectives aligned to the available materials.”

Teaching-learning materials must be attractive for the learners such as integrating technology through the use of IPAD or the like. In this era, where technologies are more attractive to the learners than the usual materials, using gadget to attract attention of the learners is the most effective method to fill the gap of the outdated materials.

Lack of classrooms and teachers are the two main reasons why two classes were being merged into a single class. If there are no available facilities, teachers assigned parents to augment or sometimes obliged the parents to provide their own facilities. If parents cannot provide such facilities, teachers coordinated the Barangay Chairperson in advance to help them provide the necessary facilities.

Theme 2. Curricular and Co-Curricular Activities

Table III below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the curricular and co-curricular theme.

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Table III: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Curricular and Co-curricular

Issue/Topic	Preparations	Practices
Making class schedules	Prepared in advance before the opening of classes	Consultation with the teachers handling multi-grade classes
	Check and approved by the supervisor	Adjustments of schedules for some unforeseen instances
Reconciling and aligning learner's competencies	Use internet portal provided by the DepEd central office	Cross posting of student potential and skills
	Conducting diagnostic test	Focus on learner's weaknesses
	Seeking approval from the division's office to conduct make-up or remedial classes	Recognizing learner's talent
	Tracking the learner's record to identify on who among them will be given remedial teaching	Remedial classes or make-up classes
	Preparing hand-outs	Let the student bring handouts to their home
	Consultative meeting with the parents at the beginning of the classes	Teachers will let the parents help their children through modular approach
Cater different languages or medium of instruction	Mingle with the community and speak with them using their own language	Recording of some unrecognized local dialect
		Teachers are forced to learned the local language
Handle different curriculum with different time allotment	Preparing common activities with different learning objectives	Dividing the class into two according to their grade level and give activities to one group while discussing to the other group

Curricular and co-curricular activities were being prepared before the opening of classes. The principal prepared the class schedule and presented to the supervisor. Major non-curricular activities such as athletic week are being prepared ahead of time. For some unforeseen instances, prepared class schedules may not be strictly followed but some adjustments were being adopted for the convenience of the teachers in order to maximize and met the learning objectives. According to Mr. 9,

"Sometimes prepared class schedules and activities may not be strictly followed..."

In reconciling or aligning learner's competencies, the multi-grade teachers used the internet portal provided by the DepEd to augment curricular learning. They also practice the cross posting and skills possess by learners on both curricular and co-curricular. They also practice collaborative teaching and recognize student's talent as what Mr. 8 said:

"Sometimes we invite some students to demonstrate their skills to other student for them to be motivated and let this student teach other students on some techniques..."

Diagnostic test is being administered to determine some weaknesses of the learners so that proper strategies will be utilized and if necessary, the teachers provide ample time to learners for remedial classes. Learner's competence is also being track to monitor their progress. If ever, not enough time because the teachers need to cope up with the lesson, the teachers gave handouts to students for them to study at home.

Teachers in multi-grade are force to learn different languages. Learning the learner's first language is very important specifically when you are teaching lower grade. Ms. 5 said:

"We need to mingle with the learners speak with their language for us to understand and also for them to understand what we are teaching."

Having different grade level and with different curriculum, the teachers prepared activities for one grade while discussing on the other grade. Sometimes, the teachers divide the class according to their grade level and then give the same task to both of them but with different objectives. The good practice to handle this situation of having different time allotment is to swap with another teacher's time.

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Theme 3. Classroom Organization and Management

Table IV below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the classroom organization and management theme.

Table IV: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Classroom Organization and Management

Issue/Topic	Preparations	Practices
Attending training relevant to multi-grade classroom management	Save money from the salary every month or bonus	Attending training with personal expenses
	Request the division's office to provide training related to multi-grade teaching	Attending training purposely for multi-grade but during the seminar it is for mono-grade
		Teacher's initiative
Classroom management style	No prepared management style	Observation of the learner's attitude
	Asked other teachers handling the multi-grade classes regarding their effective classroom organization	Applied different classroom management and adopt the best based from the observation
	Preparing different activities based on the student competencies	Giving specific activities by grouping and led by those students with skills
Different attitude and behavior	Knowing the situations of some students	Teachers adjusting their style according to student situation
	Conduct pre-assessment	Create anecdotal record of each student
	We identify elders that can control students	Develop the skills of a certain child where he/she is inclined
teacher-student relationship	Treat them as your best friend	Treating all students equal
	Orient the learners regarding school policies or classroom rules	Eating together with them during lunch
	Prepare disciplinary policies	Focus to those learners with negative attitude
	Letting the parents observe silently outside the classroom for them to understand the attitude of their children	Let the parents discipline their children
maximize student attendance and participations	Prepare games to be integrated as learning process	Creating the classroom as learning playground
	Posting of Achievement chart	Grouping of children and corresponding points be posted at achievement chart at the end of every learning activities
	Provide material or monetary prizes	Giving rewards to those students with perfect attendance for every month
create space or facilities to execute grouping	So far the classroom is standard that is conducive for learning	Other activities is being conducted outside
non-suitability of learning environment for multi-grade classes	Sent invitation to supervisor or Teacher-in-Charge (TIC) to observe	Telling the school head
		Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses (MOOE) is being used to repair facilities

There was no specific training intended for multi-grade teachers conducted by the division's office ever since and hence the common practice for the teachers to augment their expertise in handling multi-grade classes is through mentoring. They asked old teacher who already handling multi-grade classes for a long time to share their insights and strategies that are effective in managing classroom. The teachers tried their best to introduce technology for their respective class but due to non-availability of current sources and mostly limited power sources, it appears that this practice is not suitable for the school in a far-flung area. Mr. 10 said:

“For the school within the city, it is advantageous to have technology such as projector because the power is always available but for us in the far-flung area, it is difficult to use projector because the power is not always available.”

Because of these, teachers were forced to use traditional way of hanging manila paper during classes. There is no management style preferred but observing the learner's attitude may provide insight to the teachers on what strategies will be applicable in teaching. Classroom management training sometimes may not be effective or appropriate since every community has different environment or situation. Actual experience seems better than those being discussed in the training.

Attitude of the pupil differs according to the location of the school. Anecdotal record helps a lot in developing good strategies in managing the multi-grade classes. In some instances, the help of the elders in the community is needed for the learners to behave or facilitate misunderstanding among learners. Ms. 2 said:

"Before we just let the students punch with each other but now we asked some elders in the community to be present in order to pacify when there is trouble among students."

It is very difficult for the teachers to maximize the attendance of the learners, since helping their parents is the most important for them than coming to school. But because we involve parents and since they are children, teachers converted their classroom into playground specially on lower grades. Achievement of pupils were also posted for them to be motivated in competing with their classmate academically.

So far, the classroom assigned to the multi-grade teachers are all standard and can accommodate enough students. In case, there are some problems with the facilities or classroom, the teachers invite either the supervisor or principal to observe and let them witness the necessity of repairing the classroom or augmenting the facilities to maximize learning.

Theme 4. Instructional Practices

Table V below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the instructional practices theme.

Table V: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Instructional Practices

Issue/Topic	Preparation	Practice
Instructional guide in overcoming lack of training	Experiential Learning	Mentoring Action Research
instructional guide in overcoming unsuitable teaching style	Asking assistance from the other teachers	
instructional guide in overcoming poor teacher-pupil interaction	Save money	Reward system
instructional guide in overcoming large class size	Activities planning before coming to the class	Shifting Use differentiated instruction Grouping (other student inside the class while the other is doing activities outside)
instructional guide in overcoming complying the daily lesson log	Revising the content of Learning material not aligned with teaching guide	
instructional guide in overcoming difficulty in maintaining student interest/motivation		Contextualizing assessment tool

Experiential learning and mentoring from other multi-grade teachers is the most effective way of overcoming the lack of training specifically for the multi-grade teachers. In addition, action research is constantly conducted to identify strategies in overcoming different lapses and provide good insights to creating educational guide. Reward system is also being practiced to promote good relationship between teachers and learners as pointed out by Mr. 10,

"I always save money for the purpose of buying something as a reward for the students..."

Activities are being planned before coming to the class and the content of learning materials are being revised to align with the teaching guide developed. In maintaining student interest, contextualized assessment tool is very effective. Teachers do not have specific preparations and practices in overcoming difficulty in using different teaching strategies,

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language of instruction, addressing diverse needs of pupils but somehow based from their observation, some of these difficulties are being address during the actual contact with the learners.

Theme 5. Assessment Methods

Table VI below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the assessment methods theme.

Table VI: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Assessment Methods

Issue/Topic	Preparation	Practice
Development and using assessment tools	Contextualized the assessment tool	Using assessment tool provided
	Modify the assessment to suit the level of the learners	
augment available resources in supporting your assessment implementation	Prepare additional tool base on the learner's capacity	Revise the assessment into multiple choice
		Experimentation of new assessment tool

Assessment tools were provided but in order to cope with different level of learners, teachers revised this tool ahead of time. Since the provided assessment tool is standard and having lack of knowledge in conducting reliability and validity of the assessment tools, the teachers just slightly revise the tools but do not carried any reliability or validity with it. To augment the provided assessment tools, sometimes the teachers create new assessment tools and conduct observation on its suitability to the learner's capacity.

Theme 6. Parental and Community Support

Table VII below shows teacher's response on preparations and practice of multi-grade teachers under the parental and community support theme.

Table VII: Responses on Preparations and practices of Multi-grade teachers on Parental and Community Support

Issue/Topic	Preparation	Practice
negative attitude of the community or parents on multi-grade setting	Scheduling of PTA meeting before the classes begin to tackle issues and concerns in advance	Orientation during the PTA meeting
		One on one talk with the parents
order to maximize the support of the community and parents	Letting the parents plan their activities and involve them in every programs	Making the stakeholders engage in any school activities
	Creating rubrics for best parents award	Awarding of best parents during the recognition day

Parents and the community play a vital role in improving the quality of learning that the teachers can provide. The teachers before meeting their classes, initially orient the parents on their role and tackle issues and concerns regarding their children. Parents were given a chance to plan their activities for them to be involve together with their children while the teachers provide criteria in awarding the most active and most supportive parents as what Mr. 8 said:

"During the recognition, parents who are actively involved in any school activities were given an award and they are really motivated to help the school and the teachers."

IV. CONCLUSION

As observed and identified by the multi-grade teachers as presented, some of the identified preparations and practices directly improved learners' performance or overcome some challenges in teaching multi-grade classes. This paper focused on multi-grade teachers in Isabela Schools Division and hence cannot generalized its applicability as a whole. However, preparations and practices identified provides good insight for the multi-grade teachers of other areas and may enhance the knowledge of the new teachers. Preparations and practices may vary from different perspective or types of learners according to geographical locations of the school but somehow this paper manifest a good reference that guide the multi-grade teachers to be effective in handling their classes.

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