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Cry and Delight in Time of Pandemic: A Phenomenological Inquiry on the Experiences of Multi-grade Teachers in a Philippine Public Elementary School

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Abstract. Education does not only allow for the exploration of every aspect of life but as well as have a longing for knowledge and the desire to take this learning to the next level. Thus, the teacher's role in the teaching and learning process is vital. However, that delivery of the instruction towards the learners is a big challenge for the teachers who are handling Multi-grade teaching in this new normal. Multi-grade teaching is a situation in which one teacher has to teach many grade levels, all at the same time. Thus, the paper explores the lived experiences of Multi-Grade Teachers in public elementary school in the time of pandemic. Aided by a phenomenological research approach, the data were gathered from purposively sampled participants using face-to-face and online interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis devised by Lichtman. The findings reveal semblance in the participants' views and practices in multi-grade teaching during the pandemic. Despite the detected adverse elements that relegate it, multi-grade teachers remain passionately dedicated to facilitating learning. However, making learners master the competencies required is still a great challenge to realize. Thus, the collaboration of all stakeholders, school administrators and local government are vital to address this perennial challenge in multi-grade teaching.

Keywords. Education, multi-grade teaching, multi-grade teachers, phenomenology, Philippines

1. Introduction

Education does not only allow for the exploration of every aspect of life but as well as have a longing for knowledge and the desire to take this learning to the next level. As according to Valk, (2017) Education, in one form or another, has been integral to the human condition since time immemorial. To be human is, among other things, to learn [22].

With a world population of 7 billion people and limited natural resources, we, as individuals and societies need to learn to live together sustainably. We need to take action responsibly based on the understanding that what we do today can have implications on the lives of people and the planet in future. As like what UNESCO aims that is to improve access to quality education on sustainable development at all levels and in all social contexts, to transform society by reorienting education and help people develop knowledge, skills, values and behaviours needed for sustainable development [20].

Thus, the teacher's role in the teaching and learning process is vital as well as the well sustained curriculum. As according to Philippine Department of Education, curriculum is inclusive and built around the needs of the learners and the community. In this regard, curriculum is a complex concept and can be considered students' experience in a particular class or program in studying, usually leading to obtaining a degree of education (Null, 2012). It can refer to the content, the teacher's intentions or plans, the structure of learning activities and assessment, or the change in skill, knowledge, and capability experienced by the student (Niculescu, 2009).

In the Philippines, to address the Education for All program by the Department of Education despite of the many situations that the Philippine Education is facing like having few enrollees in certain school, students or learners that their school is far from home and sometimes there's not enough teachers and classroom, the department continues to find ways to bring children to school in order to complete their basic education [17]. One of these is the holding of multi-grade classes.

A multi-grade class consists of two or more different grade levels inside a single-grade classroom handled by one teacher or multi-grade teacher for an entire school year [17]. It is often implemented in elementary schools located at remote and sparsely-populated localities. Figures from DepEd show that there are close to a million enrollees in multi-grade classes across the country [17].

But today's that the world is experiencing the tremendous effect of pandemic that it creates the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 percent of the world's student population, up to 99 percent in low and lower-middle income countries [4], the delivery of the instruction towards the learners is a big challenge for the teachers especially those who are handling Multi-grade teaching even though this crisis has stimulated innovation within the education sector.

It is in this light that the researcher intends to explore the lived experiences of Multi-Grade Teachers in a Philippine Public Elementary School during Pandemic since Multi-grade teaching is a situation in which one teacher has to teach many grade levels, all at the same time. The question, therefore, is, what could be the meaning of the teaching experiences during pandemic for multi-grade teachers? How do the multi-grade teachers experience the teaching experiences in times of pandemic? Thus, the intents of this phenomenological inquiry is to explore the lived experiences of Multi-Grade Teachers in a Philippine Public Elementary School during pandemic assuming that they may have different perspectives given their length of service as a multi-grade teacher, their ages, status, sex and educational attainment. In particular, it investigates and analyzes the ideas, perceptions and practices of multi-grade teachers during pandemic.

2. Method

Phenomenology is an inductive descriptive method that aims to describe participants' lived experiences in teaching social science in this time of the pandemic and this concerns understanding its meaning [11]. It will also hope to gain an understanding of the essential "truths" of the lived experience and will investigate thoroughly their respective intrinsic situations [3].

The paper intended to explore the lived experiences of Multi-Grade Teachers during pandemic. Utilizing a qualitative design, the paper used the phenomenological inquiry to explore the meanings that the multi-grade teachers in public elementary school have experience

during pandemic. Using the phenomenological inquiry, researcher can gather more insights into the facilitating experiences towards teaching of the multi-grade teachers in public elementary school. Since the central structure of an experience as according to Smith, (2018) is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object [18]. It also examines the experiences of unique individuals in a given situation, thus exploring not what is the actual experience of them but what is preconceived to be [14]. It further concerns with meaning and the way in which meaning arises in experience [12]. This method simply aims to discover and describe the primordial meanings or essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants [13]. The process brackets or suspends all previous knowledge of the phenomenon being explored that is not due to the actual instance of the phenomenon [7].

The participants for the qualitative inquiry are the Multi-grade teachers in a public elementary school since they would be knowledgeable informants in this study. They were determined using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling involves collecting cases that are likely to give an information about the phenomenon that the researcher intends to study [8]. The process involves selecting participants that have lived experiences in the phenomenon that is being studied, thus the researcher will include only those with expertise in a certain area. The participants were chosen through these enforced criteria: (1) should be multi-grade teachers in public elementary schools; (2) tenured teachers with at least 4 years teaching experience as public elementary multi-grade teacher; (3) have taken distance learning modality like modular instruction and could articulate their experiences well; (4) he/she currently teaching this school year 2020-2021; and lastly, (5) should have a master's unit in education. The data were collected from the participants using an in-depth semi-structured interview. Phenomenological studies primarily rely on in-depth interviews to collect data [15]. The in-depth phenomenological interviews are "directed to the participant's experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions about the phenomenon" [23]. According to Lichtman [14], Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative research and appropriately used when "studying people's understanding of the meaning in their lived world" [9]. Furthermore, according to Dumay and Qu (2011), the use of the in-depth interview helped the researcher gather or investigate detailed useful information which can provide her a useful way to learn about the world of others [6].

Data were obtained about how the participants "think and feel in the most direct ways". Meanwhile, the recursive textual analysis guided by the three C's of Lichtman was employed to analyse the data thematically. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the participants and were subsequently transcribed and analyzed. Thematic analysis was performed to unearth themes emanating from their narratives. Findings were conveyed to selected participants for validation. They have consequently concurred with the study results.

The collection of data was done through interviews using the semi-structured. The in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtual interview using zoom application among selected participants. The researcher prepared the guide for the interview protocol, then she explained the purpose of the research, the time duration of the interview, the style of the interview, emphasizing the content, confidentiality, consent, and recording methods, and the use of the data. The researcher read the interview protocol before the proper interview begins. The participants were given the chance to ask questions and clarify anything about the interview and they were asked to sign the written consent to confirm that they are willing to proceed.

The interviews were conducted individually and privately. The responses were electronically recorded and some important points were written down. During the interview, participants were advised that they could state their responses in a language they are

comfortable with to express their thoughts clearly. Moreover, the researcher asked the follow-up questions for probing so that the participants could elaborate or explain their ideas or answers fully.

The interview ended with another explanation or informing the participants of the purpose of the study and that the data will be presented in the professional community. The researcher also gave assurance to the participants about the strict observance of confidentiality with regards to the interviewee's identity and responses. Thus, it emphasized their anonymity. Lastly, the researcher expresses his gratitude and appreciation to the interviewees for their generous participation in this academic endeavour. The researcher immediately checked, reviewed, and transcribed the data in preparation for analysis.

To address ethical issues, the researcher informed the consent of the participants for their voluntary participation in the study that they have the right to withdraw. Also, the researcher ensured the participants that access to the data is solely by the researcher and will be utilized for the study only. No information that discloses their identity will be released or published without their specific consent to the disclosure. The materials that contained the primary information derived from them will be appropriately stored and protected so that no one can access them except the researcher. Eventually, the raw and electronic were disposed accordingly after data processing within a given period. The health and safety of the participants and the researcher in this time of a pandemic are paramount. Since the researcher gathered some of the data through face-to-face interview in school, the participants and the researcher adhered the Department of Education Order number 14 series of 2020 [5] or guidelines of required health standards in school. The specific guidelines like observing social distancing, sanitization, temperature test, contact tracing, the wearing of a face mask, and face shield were strictly observed.

3. Results

The goal of the paper is to explore the lived experiences of multi-grade teachers in a public elementary school during pandemic. To facilitate the discussion, this section identified three themes based on the questions that the researcher intends to explore in this study.

3.1. Facilitating learning as the core of instruction

On the question about "what could be the meaning of the teaching experiences during pandemic for multi-grade teachers?", most of the participants shared common ideas that facilitating learning is one of the important factors that the teachers should give emphasis especially in this time of pandemic.

Curriculum Organization. As according to participants, even though there's a training that was being conducted to them for being an MG teacher, it is still not enough for them to cope up with challenges they encountered in this time of pandemic, given the fact that most learners of them in modular instruction, tend to just copy the answer keys of the modules since they didn't understand the lesson well. Some participants verbalized it this way:

"In this time of pandemic, there's a dire need for me to adjust on my instruction. Sometimes, I get confused if in what grade level should I give remediation. Especially, those answer sheets on the modules that was submitted to me were late and almost forgot to put their name. And the worst is, it is not learners who answered the activities given and sometimes they just copied the answer key of the modules. In that situation, I think again, another intervention just to facilitate the learnings of the concerned learner."

“there are some instance that due to wrapped up since the principal needs the intervention report, it was happened that I forgot if which grade level that certain learners belong and when I checked my class record in that certain name, that certain name doesn't belong to my class. In that, I look at again the profiling of my all learners, and I discovered, that name is belong to my learner parents...hahaha[laughing]...”

Professional Growth. Consequently, multi-grade teachers need to adjust to the trends since there's no face-to-face class and most of their learner's as far as they know is very dependent on the instruction that they give, as some participants shared the following:

“...I embraced the trends of recording my lesson and give the copy to those learners of mine that have smartphone....”

Furthermore, some participants also shared that this pandemic scenario is really worst one but he did his best in despite of this. He accounts his difficulties during retrieval of modules and in facilitating the learners. And he observed that most of his learner's didn't answer the modules given. He shared one scenario of the experiences by one of his learner:

“...imagine ma'am, I have one learner who is working in the sugarcane field. He's the elder among his siblings. So even before pandemic, he really works in the field. So it's just normal, right. And then in his module, instead an answer sheet that is being there, it is a note saying nga wala nia kuno gin ansiran ang module kay indi sia kaintsindi kag ang iya mga upod pud nga mga karga tapas, indi pud kaintsindi sa topic. So imbes kuno nga mapalibog sia, maubra nalang sia kay kanugon sa oras, yawat nalang na sa iya kinitaan since wala pa klase. Imagine, he treated modular instruction nga daw wala lang klase. (that he didn't answer the module, because he as well as his fellow sacadas didn't know the lesson. So instead of spending time in thinking about the modules, he would rather work because time is important, whereas he can earn while there's still no class yet.”

3.2. MG Teachers' Accountability and Responsibility: Risk Taking Journey

The second theme, “Risk Taking Journey” evolved from the questions concerning their experiences being MG teachers to their personal lives. Almost of the participants share the same sentiments about the journey that they undertake of being a multi-grade teacher in this time of pandemic. Even how difficult it is, they need to risk their self for the learners.

Professional and Personal Isolation. The participants shared same sentiments that this distance learning modality tends them to feel despair and confusion but by keep on orienting their selves towards the long view, towards the fact that what we are in the midst of this culture shift requires acceptance and perseverance. Some participants shared this:

“...as a mother of three kids, it's really a risk taking to be one of the MG Teacher. There's a need for me to succumb the danger especially when I need to remediate those behind learners. I need to home visit different grade level of my advisory in that certain time even there's the “what if” in my mind...like paano nalang kong indi maayo ang pamatyag sang bata nga ini...tani ok lang sia...baw paano kung makasugata ako sang may covid gali... ukon what if naka mingle ni sia sa may covid..paano nalang akon tatlo ka bata... (what if the child is not feeling well...hoping that this certain child is alright...what if I can encounter a person who have this covid...or what if this certain child was happened to mingle with a person with covid... what will happen to my three kids)”

“...being an MG teacher, daw si Dora the explorer kana (you will like Dora the Explorer). It is because, sometimes...nope...almost gid gali that I'm about to do checking the modules, then these learners of mine are kind of “pa special effect” because wala gid na permi ila module sa retrieval section, they are siblings in different grade level under my advisory. So

what I do, kadto ang maninay sa ila balay because there's need to give report on students at risk, so masuksuk sang power ranger attire para indi masitaan. Pag-abot sa ila balay, wala tawo, then the neighborhood just told me na adto sila sa ulingan, nanguling. So hulaton kopa? Of course not, it's already afternoon. So I need to go back again on the next day."

Classroom Management in the midst of pandemic. In addition, there's a dire necessity to monitor the learning progress of the learners, especially their needs, like intervention materials given the fact that they are in different grade level. So their desire to complete their work even there's a risk was set aside for the meantime. As some participants share the following:

"... Can you imagine monitoring and facilitating multi-grade class alone with restrictions due to COVID...what can you do? It is exhausting. Unlike before nga naga face to face pa, medyo hapos lang. Since ara gid ko nagaobserve sa akon mga bata.(that it is face-to – face setting, it's a little bit easy. Since I am there who can directly observe my learners) But today, it's really a total different."

"I need sometimes give incentives to pupils for completing the task on time so they will be inspired to finished the other upcoming task on time. Even though I myself need that incentives too...I'm not rich, you know that the nature of being a teacher, but for the sake of learning, I exert effort. Sometimes, I didn't give contribution to my own family. Because that supposed budget to them, I give it to my learners. And the worst, it is my mother who give me allowance. I'm still like a student."

3.3. MG Teachers' Social Aids and Communication: The Art of Camaraderie

The third and final theme that developed from this study was the perception that arts of camaraderie impacted the cooperation of the parents/guardians towards distance learning in a multi-grade setting. Participants agreed that having camaraderie towards them can lessen the burdens that they have towards instruction in this time of pandemic. Participants shared that through good communication to their stakeholders enable them to deliver the learning needs of the kids. They encouraged the participation of those parents or relatives who have the capacity in facilitating the learning of their respective child. In that, they can address the needs of those learners with nobody would help them with their modules because their parents were uneducated too. For example, the participants mentioned these specific situations:

"...Imbes na suongon ko tanan, (instead that I will face all of it) why not make use the abilities of parents nga may ara man ihibalo sa certain nga lesson. (who are knowledgeable in that certain lesson)."

"...to lessen my hardship in facilitating different grade level though I am not financially stable, why should I not train parents of my learners that can facilitate the learning of their child too..."

"At first, it is really difficult and big challenge to deal and convince the parents due to the fact that they are one of the busiest people too. But because of the constant talk, they agreed in this setting."

4. Discussion

The results of the study yielded many significant insights about the lived experiences of multi-grade teachers in public elementary school. The participants were able to highlight three important experiences they learned and realized as a multi-grade teacher in public elementary school during pandemic. First, MG teachers give focus on facilitating learning as core of instruction; Second, the MG Teachers' Accountability and Responsibility is a Risk Taking

Journey; lastly, MG Teachers' realized that Social Aids and Communication is big help and The Art of Camaraderie should be emphasized among their number one stakeholders, their parents.

Towards facilitating learning, teachers shared that it's the important thing to be emphasized among by the other teachers, not just by the MG teachers. That's why teachers need to adjust and accept the new trends in delivering and facilitating the learning of their learners. Adapting teaching to different student characteristics by using diverse methods of teaching is necessary. Adaptation to the ability levels, patterns of different abilities, learning styles, personality characteristics, and cultural backgrounds [1]. The participants acknowledged that teaching amidst pandemic required not just cognitive domain but as well as intense affective effort. There is a need to be more accepting, open minded by not giving up the standards of quality education, and be attentive to emotional factors with pupils as well as to their parents or guardians.

On the Accountability and Responsibility of being an MG teacher amidst pandemic viewed by them as a risk taking journey towards personal and professional isolation and to the kind of classroom management in the midst of pandemic.

On the MG teachers professional and personal isolation, they highlighted that their teaching often takes place on the remote schools in difficult to reach areas and needs to visit learners' areas too without an assurance that they will be safe along the way. They sacrificed even the safety of their own family just for the call of duty and responsibility. These teachers not only face the difficulties of dealing with a multi-grade class, but also other constraints such as lack of resources, infrequent supervision, and poor living conditions [16].

The kind of classroom management in the midst of pandemic can be viewed as a culture shift kind of classroom of teachers, since students or learners now are studying in their home. Taole, (2012) also point out that classroom management is another problem in regards to multi-grade teaching [19]. Students aren't the only ones who might feel the feeling of despair, distressed or exhausted in this kind of distance learning setting. It is the most struggle to MG teachers because MG teachers need to prepare 8preparations like remediation, intervention, making of weekly home learning plans, printing of modules, and almost of the time contextualizing some of the readymade modules per grade level they handled so learners can able to relate and understand the lesson and will not may easily get bored. When facilitating the learning of learners is needed, MG teachers requires to do home visitation. Supposed to be the interaction among learners' parents is one of the most important elements of successful quality education in the midst of pandemic and lessen the burdens of the MG teachers.

Lastly, the art of camaraderie on the social aids and communication of teachers is beneficial to stay connected to the learners through the help of parent's collaborative efforts. Collaborative engagement motivates learning and promotes a deeper and more critically aware approach to the subject matter. Unfortunately, collaboration is one of the most difficult things to achieve when students are not physically present [21]. But due to MG teachers' initiatives and constant talk to parents, the essence of collaboration has been materialized

Based on the lived experiences of MG teachers, we can't contempt the Multi-grade education because it is one of the means that some learners can access to education, since education is a right of every citizen, regardless of their location and status in life. Teachers are obliged to deliver education despite of pandemic to remote villages and mountains to educate children in these places. Aside from teaching they also have other obligations like paper works to be accomplish. So, for those who have second guessing that being a multi-grade teacher in this time of pandemic is an easy one, maybe it's time for you to realize that MG teachers are

but humans who also experience personal struggles not just about facilitating learnings but as well as domestic problems and financial burdens which also reflected some of the teachers in this study. These have to be considered not just by school administrators but as well as by the government and plan ways to help teachers with these scenarios.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenological study was undertaken with the intention to explore the lived experiences of multi grade teachers in a Philippine public elementary school during pandemic. On the basis of the study, conclusions were made that Multi-grade teachers have potentials to improve the quality of education and they are essential in ensuring basic education for all. Knowing the lived experiences of MG teacher that is resulted in realizing and understanding their acquaintance on aiding learning as the core of instruction, their risk taking journey just to comply with their accountability and responsibility and their art of camaraderie towards social aids and communication among their stakeholders, gives us an idea that MG teachers have needs that are different from regular teachers. This means that maybe it's time for the government that those MG teachers in the field of education is a must to be reviewed, so effectiveness in delivering quality education will not be diminishing since teacher already presented the struggle that they encountered for the continuous delivery of the instruction especially in this time of pandemic that is needed by each learners for them to finish their basic education as what Department of Education aims too to each Filipino children.

Furthermore, MG teachers literally affected their personal lives since all their plans were dependent upon what is possible considering their time allotted for the learners, and for making contextualized materials for those who are advanced and behind learners. Those sacrifices that rendered by them requires support from the government. So, teachers' despite of all the struggles they encountered will still have more courage to pursue what they have started.

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