

The Multigrade Education Program: A Policy Evaluation

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Abstract: *The Republic of the Philippines, through the Department of Education (DepEd), has mandated the implementation of an inclusive education program called the "Multigrade Education Program" (MEP) to complete the elementary level of all school-age children in remote areas and with limited classroom teachers. This study endeavored to carry out a policy evaluation focusing on the weaknesses and strengths of the MEP implementation in the district schools of Carigara, Leyte, Philippines. Concerns and issues were asked from the teacher respondents about the MEP's implementation through surveys and interviews. The findings revealed that teachers successfully handled the multigrade class because they only had a small number of students to monitor. The absence of learning materials for multigrade classes is their primary issue. Lack of teacher training and parents' participation was an evident concern. Another issue is the limited classroom intended for multigrade classes, though this is a problem in many schools of the country. Nonetheless, the involvement of parents and school stakeholders in the MEP implementation bring about positive outcome augmenting the teaching-learning process, especially for schools situated in far-flung rural areas. Multigrade students usually develop good study habits and become more responsible, cooperative, and participatory with positive mindsets and meaningful learning experiences. Ultimately, the success of MEP implementation lies in the dedication of teachers and the support of various school stakeholders, the availability of learning resources, proactive involvement of parents, the community, and school administrators.*

Keywords: Multi-grade Class, Multi-grade Teachers, Access to Quality Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Multigrade education is an innovative step in the educational system, especially in remote areas making school learning accessible to all. The Department of Education (DepEd) is mandated to implement MEP all over the country as needed in the local area. Many countries in the world embrace a multigrade teaching approach as one of the interventions that somehow resolved issues of the lack of teachers, lack of schools, and few learners (Şahin et al., 2022; Kobayashi, 2022; Bennell, 2022; Fargas-Malet and Bagley, 2022; Shareefa, 2021). All school-age children have access to education and finish their elementary level in the comfort of their villages (Demirel and Kurt, 2021).

Parental involvement in their children's education and learning is crucial (Moorhouse and Beaumont, 2020). Parents are the primary stakeholders in schools whose roles and accountability are in providing and contributing to the better education of their children (Gross et al., 2020). In the Philippine setting, usually, the mothers are empowered to participate and get involved in school-related activities supportive of their children's schooling. Mothers play crucial roles in the effective delivery of early childhood education, so their participation in many school programs is highly encouraged (Abocejo et al., 2012). All countries in the globe place priority on multigrade classroom teaching methods (Engin, 2018).

The Philippine socio-economic and political situations are critical conditions that considerably affect the future of Filipino children (Mendoza-Sintones, 2019). Despite efforts to eradicate poverty, it still exists in the present, affecting

children (Fernandez and Abocejo, 2014). Except in remote areas without established primary schools, access to education is not considered a problem in the Philippines (Cabalo and Cabalo, 2019). The country has implemented inclusive education policies, one of which is the founding of a multigrade education.

Primary schools are the main settings for multigrade courses, where teachers simultaneously instruct two or more classes at various grade levels (Motamedi and Khajourie, 2020), and students are of different age levels. In the Philippines, teaching more than one grade has been common since the 1920s, but the start of the official implementation of the "Multigrade Program in Philippine Education (MPPE)" was launched in 1993 (Cabalo and Cabalo, 2019). Through the DECS Order No. 38, series of 1993, known as "improving access to elementary education by providing complete grade level in all public elementary schools through a combination of multigrade classes."

To achieve "Education for All" (EFA) and to address teachers' shortage, multigrade teaching was one of the alternative means (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017). The organization, operation, and implementation were promulgated through policies and guidelines in the DepEd Order No. 96, series of 1997. This is one of the strategies of the DepEd to provide access to quality education for all school-age children, especially in remote villages where the establishment of schools for multigrade classes was crucially needed.

Through DepEd Order No. 81, series of 2019, the MEP provided support and training to multigrade teachers, who

handled two combined classes to ensure that quality education is delivered and achieved through the program. Completion rate among elementary grade level children was one of the concerns of most parents. In remote villages, the implementation is through all six grade levels (Taole, 2020; Delgado et al., 2019). This program seems practical and convenient for parents since they won't be spending much sending their kids to urban schools to finish their elementary level when some of the schools in the village do not have complete grade levels.

This paper evaluated the multigrade education program implementation in rural schools given the accessibility of the said program to all school-age children that address the different problems encountered in accessing quality education through the program.

1.1 Overview of the MEP Policy

To make education universally accessible, 164 UN members sealed the global commitment to implement multigrade education (Cornish, 2021). Multigrade teaching is common in rural areas where there is a smaller number of school enrollees. A minimum of 8 eight (8) pupils and a maximum of thirty-five (35) pupils per class shall be observed (DepEd Order no. 96, s. 1997). This somehow matches the number of enrollees in the setting.

Aside from the purpose of accessibility of learning in remote areas, multigrade teaching offers advantages like the opportunity of re-teaching since there is a small number of students. There is also less academic and social competition between peers because cooperation is more practiced, older students became more responsible, increased trust and positive relationship between students and teachers because of a long time of being together in a class (Lapuz, 2015).

The Philippines has adopted the multigrade teaching approach as a cost-effective method of raising students' participation rates and academic achievement in rural schools (Naparan and Alinsug, 2021). Children tend to participate more since they are given a lot of activities together with the other grade level in a class. Teachers can design performance tasks and activities and let the students engage in various meaningful ways to develop students' full potential to learn (Saraspe and Abocejo, 2020). When successfully delivered, the teaching of a multigrade class is similar to that of a monograde class (Motamedi and Khajourie, 2020). It also depends on the teaching techniques of a multigrade teacher. Mendoza-Sintones (2019) noted that the diversity of learners is not the problem that needs to be solved but the opportunity to deliver and accomplish better learning.

The ability to manage two or more courses at once is made possible by performance-based learning in multigrade classes. Appropriate tasks and activities, aligned with the curriculum and suited to every grade level, can be an impetus for knowledge and skills development (Mendoza-Sintones, 2019). Activities done may be applicable in real-life situations when learning is collaborative in a multigrade class.

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2. METHODS

This study attempted to put forward a policy evaluation of the Multigrade Education Program (MEP) of the Philippines, implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd) in the district schools of Carigara, Leyte Province. The teacher-respondents who teach multigrade classes in the schools' study area were asked about implementation-related concerns and issues.

Secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed research journals to substantiate the critical analysis and policy evaluation given the weaknesses and strengths of the program policy implementation. The primary data obtained from the teacher-respondents corroborated with the secondary data analysis and interpretations. However, the study has been limited to the schools of the Carigara I District where only six teachers engage in multigrade teaching delivery and implementation of the MEP.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Multigrade Program Implementation

The DepEd has implemented the MEP policy to address the issue of education accessibility, for all grade schoolers, through multigrade education primarily offered in rural and remote communities. The MEP offers a promising future to learners in far-flung villages whose parents cannot afford to send their children to school because of poverty (Fernandez and Abocejo, 2014). In eradicating illiteracy, universal education is developed and improved along the teaching-learning process. Many countries regard multigrade teaching as a form of education that address these concerns (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017). Though common in most countries, there are still inevitable problems encountered in the administration of multigrade classes like management and administration, financial aspect, curriculum, training, and deployment of teachers (Buaraphan and Sohaila, 2018).

3.2 Training for multigrade teachers

In rural areas, many teachers do not have proper training and are unfamiliar with the updated teaching techniques and strategies (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Being a multigrade teacher is both a challenge and an opportunity for professional development (Vasquez-Martinez et al., 2021). A teacher's professional development, knowledge, and skills are all relevant for teaching in multigrade classes.

A multigrade teacher needs to be aware of the learners' needs to become productive persons in the community (Mendoza-Sintones, 2019). The knowledge and skills of teachers are handed down to students granting there is effective teaching (Trio and Abocejo, 2019). To ensure the of the learners, the multigrade teacher needs to apply multiple teaching strategies that would reduce the waiting time between activities of students (Vasquez-Martinez et al., 2021). One of the pressing issues in multigrade education in rural schools is the provision of training for multigrade teachers. Teaching effectiveness mirrors content and having well-defined skills, so teachers who possess good quality teaching skills, acquired through in-service training, carry out their teaching effectively and efficiently (Engin, 2018).

3.3 Multigrade Learning Resources

Over the years, the need to use varied learning materials and resources has led to the participation of concerned stakeholders in the educational system in different nations (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017). Learning resources include all materials that aid in attaining the program objectives (Msimanga, 2019). These resources provide vital information to teachers and learners. There are varied ways where the acquired skills are adopted in the teaching-learning process if they are used effectively by the teacher to capture students' attention and interests (Msimanga, 2019). Furthermore, Msimanga (2019) noted that learners tend to engage and are motivated when their attention is captured and learned.

Multigrade teachers are essential contributors in the MEP implementation because they sustain students' interests and offer meaningful productive learning experiences (Novianti, 2022; Ballesteros and Ocampo, 2016). Every teacher handling a multigrade class needs varied resources appropriate to learners' needs, such as multimedia and even things available in the environment (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017).

3.4 Learning Facilities

The lack of classrooms and other educational facilities are among the identified issues with multigrade class implementation (Naparan and Castañeda, 2021). Most rural schools have poor facilities and are in an unacceptable state (Tomaro, 2018) that may not function as safe, efficient, and effective schools. The teaching environment is a factor in evaluating students' performance and learning process (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). A well-equipped classroom, with all the necessary teaching aids for both teachers and pupils, makes for a suitable environment for learning. Sometimes,

parents would send their children to a school where they see good infrastructure and safe facilities.

2.5 Community Involvement

Schools offering multigrade classes are mostly in isolated rural areas. These schools may not be as accessible as urban schools, so parents and other stakeholders are encouraged to participate in the curriculum implementation. Parents are the main school stakeholders who can extend support in various ways (Dagalea et al., (2022). Teachers in multigrade classes are also trained in approaches how to establish rapport between the community and schools (Şahin et al., 2022; Taole, 2022; Ballesteros and Ocampo, 2016).

This is very helpful since parents are the immediate stakeholders in schools who participate in the various school programs and projects implementation benefitting both the schools and the community where the primary beneficiary is the learners. Another is the children who are often obliged to child labor (Fernandez and Abocejo, 2014). They are discouraged to attend schools because of the wrong notion that the curriculum has nothing to do with their living and the lack of support from their parents (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Many children in remote areas are engaged in farming as their primary source of living for their family, and most of their families live below the poverty threshold (Malinao et al., 2022). Finishing their elementary education is the last resort when they can read and write in their lower grades (Abril et al., 2022; Fernandez and Abocejo, 2014)

3.6 Teaching and learning in multigrade class

Oftentimes, teachers in rural schools are also assigned to teach in a multigrade class in which they teach different grade levels in a class. Teachers are confronted with limited time in lesson plan preparations, time management, assessment, and classroom discipline for a class of two grade levels (Du Plessis and Mestry, 2019). Multigrade teachers must possess solid classroom management techniques to effectively manage students' activities in the classroom (Msimanga, 2019).

Students in multigrade classes developed independent work and study habits. They collaborate with different groups and become responsible and cooperative with a positive mindset toward helping one another (Motamedi and Khajouie, 2020). Students' involvement in learning leads to meaningful experiences in various learning activities, as another perspective of the curriculum in multigrade classes. For peer learning, group tasks are given to students to hone their skills (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017). In a group, for example, advanced learners can mentor their classmates while the teacher is teaching other students (Naparan and Castañeda, 2021). A multigrade class is child-centered and an active process for the learner. The students are taught with a self-directed learning approach to adapt to self-studying habits (Engin, 2018).

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers faced challenges and difficulties in the MEP implementation despite strategies and interventions by the national government through the DepEd. The effectiveness of the multigrade program largely depends on the dedicated and trained teachers, availability of learning resources, willingness, and trust of parents, interests of learners, and constant monitoring by the school administrators. Community and stakeholders' involvement are very crucial for the success of the MEP program. Given the study findings and conclusion, the authors suggest that teachers be given training and adequate funding by providing quality instruction, physical facilities, and teaching and learning resources. Teaching in multigrade classes necessitates multitasking tasks and responsibilities, so teachers must be well compensated.

Teachers must undergo capacity workshops and training, and an awareness program for the learners' parents and stakeholders be put in place to support teachers at every stage of the learning process. Needed funding must be made available to schools offering multigrade classes. In remote villages, the local government units (LGUs) must oversee and assist in the program implementation. The curriculum must be updated, particularly concerning classroom teaching strategies.

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