



International Journal of Educational Methodology

Volume 11, Issue 3, 377 - 390.

ISSN: 2469-9632

<http://www.ijem.com/>

Differentiated Instruction in Multigrade Classrooms: Bridging Theory and Practice

Jaime B. Bunga^{ID}

University of Santo Tomas, PHILIPPINES

Maria Luisa R. Olano^{ID}

University of Santo Tomas, PHILIPPINES

Manuel R. Morga^{ID}

University of Santo Tomas, PHILIPPINES

Received: March 31, 2025 • Revised: June 2, 2025 • Accepted: July 13, 2025

Abstract: This qualitative study explored the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in Philippine multigrade classrooms with the aim of understanding teachers' experiences, strategies, and challenges, as well as developing a performance appraisal tool. Guided by its specific objectives, the research examined how teachers plan, deliver, and manage differentiated lessons while addressing the diverse learning needs of students across multiple grade levels. Findings revealed that effective DI is rooted in intentional instructional planning, including learner profiling, curriculum mapping, and flexible pacing. Instructional delivery was enriched through the use of thematic and multimodal strategies, ability-based groupings, and contextually relevant teaching aids, although technological access and training remained persistent barriers. Classroom management practices emphasized inclusive routines, peer collaboration, and adaptive learning spaces. Teachers also highlighted the importance of assessment tools and reflective teaching practices in continuously improving instruction. In response to these findings, the study developed the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT), which synthesizes theoretical frameworks with authentic classroom practices. The MDI-PAT serves as both a self-assessment and professional development guide for multigrade educators, promoting ongoing improvement in DI competencies. The study concludes that enhancing teacher capacities in planning, delivery, assessment, classroom management, and reflective practice is essential for fostering inclusive and effective learning environments in multigrade contexts. The insights and tools presented provide a practical framework for educational stakeholders seeking to enhance multigrade instruction in resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: *Differentiated instruction, multigrade teaching, performance appraisal tool.*

To cite this article: Bunga, J. B., Olano, M. L. R., & Morga, M. R. (2025). Differentiated instruction in multigrade classrooms: Bridging theory and practice. *International Journal of Educational Methodology*, 11(3), 377-390. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ijem.11.3.377>

Introduction

The Philippine public elementary school system comprises both monograde and multigrade schools. In monograde classes, students belong to a single grade level, whereas in multigrade classrooms, a single teacher simultaneously instructs learners from two or more grade levels (Berry, 2001). This setup, common in rural and underserved communities, arises from low enrollment and limited resources (Little et al., 2006; Veenman, 1996), necessitating instructional strategies that are both inclusive and adaptable (Mengistie, 2020).

To respond to the diversity of learners, the Department of Education (DepEd) has institutionalized Differentiated Instruction (DI) as a core pedagogical approach through the K to 12 Basic Education Program (Republic Act, 2013). DI involves tailoring content, process, and assessment to learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). This is especially critical in multigrade settings, where developmental stages vary significantly within a single classroom (Pozas et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2019).

Extensive research underscores the positive impact of DI on student achievement, engagement, and motivation (Goyibova et al., 2025; Kalinowski et al., 2024; Subban, 2006). Moreover, DI aligns with inclusive and equitable education goals by ensuring that every student—regardless of ability, socioeconomic background, or learning pace—can access meaningful learning opportunities (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Magableh & Abdullah, 2022; Santamaria, 2009).

While the Multigrade Program in Philippine Education (MPPE) has made significant policy and institutional gains, recent regional studies continue to highlight persistent challenges in implementing effective teaching strategies, such as

* Corresponding author:

Jaime B. Bunga, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Espana Blvd. Sampaloc, Manila 1008 Philippines. ✉ jaime.bunga.gs@ust.edu.ph

© 2025 The author(s); licensee IJEM by RAHPSODE LTD, UK. Open Access - This article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).



Differentiated Instruction (DI). For instance, a recent study by Bunga (2025) found that multigrade teachers in the Philippines face challenges in utilizing technology, contextualized materials, and diverse assessment methods, directly impacting their ability to differentiate instruction effectively. This scarcity of tools is further corroborated by the study conducted by Rondero and Casupanan (2024) in Zambales, which consistently reports a lack of instructional materials, ready-made lesson plans, and other resources as key difficulties for multigrade teachers.

Thus, there is a pressing need for a teacher-friendly, context-specific performance appraisal tool grounded in both theory and classroom realities. Such a tool can help multigrade teachers evaluate, reflect on, and improve their differentiated instruction practices. This study employs a qualitative exploratory design to develop the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT), which aims to assess teachers' application of DI across three essential dimensions: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and classroom management.

This research aims to explore and articulate how differentiated instruction is implemented by multigrade teachers in real classroom settings. Specifically, it investigates their experiences and perspectives on DI and identifies the challenges across instructional planning, delivery, and classroom management. Furthermore, the study aims to improve the application of differentiated instruction in a multigrade learning environment. Ultimately, the study proposes the development of the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT)—a practical instrument to guide teacher self-assessment and professional development within the unique conditions of multigrade teaching.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design, aiming to investigate the lived experiences and classroom practices of multigrade teachers in implementing Differentiated Instruction (DI). The research focused on how educators apply DI strategies across three critical domains: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and classroom management. Data collection was conducted through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs), which elicited in-depth, experience-based insights into the pedagogical adaptations that multigrade teachers use to meet the diverse needs of learners.

The FGDs were semi-structured in format and guided by open-ended questions aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Three (3) FGD sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the lead researcher, with the assistance of co-moderators who documented non-verbal cues and helped manage group dynamics ethically and respectfully. Participants were encouraged to share freely, with emphasis on maintaining confidentiality, promoting mutual respect, and ensuring equal opportunity to speak.

The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify key patterns, instructional challenges, and innovative practices related to DI in multigrade contexts. The iterative analysis allowed the researchers to cluster recurring narratives and develop coherent themes that informed the design of a practical performance appraisal tool.

To strengthen the theoretical foundation of the emerging themes, the analysis was anchored on Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Framework and Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). These frameworks were not only referenced descriptively but also critically applied to interpret the scaffolding practices, readiness-based grouping, and individualized pacing strategies shared by the participants.

Sample and Data Collection

The study engaged eight (8) multigrade teachers from public elementary schools in Regions III, IV-A (Calabarzon), and IV-B (Mimaropa). All participants had previously undergone formal training in DI through the Department of Education's (DepEd) National Training Program, ensuring that they possessed foundational knowledge and relevant experience in applying DI strategies.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, enabling the researcher to intentionally include teachers with specific qualifications that aligned with the study's objectives. The selection process was facilitated in coordination with District Supervisors, who recommended eligible participants based on two main criteria:

- (1) the type of multigrade class composition they handled—whether two-grade or three-grade level combinations; and
- (2) their active participation in DI-related professional development activities.

Although the sample size was limited to eight (8) participants, data saturation was achieved by the third FGD, as no new themes emerged during subsequent discussions. The depth and redundancy of responses indicated thematic saturation, which is considered a valid threshold in qualitative inquiry involving small, focused participant groups.

All ethical protocols were followed. Formal letters were sent to the district and school administrators, and participants provided informed consent. The researchers ensured voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity throughout the process, with an ethical approach to handling power dynamics during discussions.

Analyzing of Data

The qualitative data from the FGDs were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, a method suitable for interpreting complex, experience-based data. The phases included familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting.

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were coded using open and axial coding techniques to extract relevant data points on instructional strategies, challenges, and innovations in implementing DI. Codes were then organized into broader categories aligned with the three main domains of the study: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and classroom management.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was employed by sharing the thematic summaries with the participants for validation. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted with two (2) qualitative education researchers, who reviewed the coding schemes and provided feedback on theme consistency and researchers' bias mitigation.

The final themes served as the basis for constructing the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT). The developed tool was validated and critiqued by five (5) experts in multigrade education and differentiated instruction. The tool reflects the essential competencies for DI in multigrade contexts, informed by both the lived experiences of teachers and grounded theoretical frameworks.

Findings/Results

Drawing from Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, three (3) key themes were developed: (1) instructional planning, (2) instructional delivery, and (3) classroom management. This section presents a comprehensive discussion of each theme, integrating direct insights from teachers while analyzing their implications for effective multigrade instruction.

Experiences and Perspectives of Multigrade Teachers in Differentiated Instruction

Theme 1: Instructional Planning

Teachers emphasized that effective differentiated instruction begins with a clear understanding of learners' varied profiles. Conducting diagnostic assessments at the start of the school year emerged as a critical preparatory step, enabling them to tailor instruction based on readiness levels, learning styles, and interest areas. As one teacher succinctly noted, *"You need to know what each child can do before you can teach everyone together."*

Curriculum mapping across grade levels was commonly practiced to minimize redundancy and ensure coherence of instruction. Teachers created integrated lesson plans that addressed multiple grade-level competencies within unified instructional themes. While considered effective, this approach was described as demanding. Several participants reported that aligning multiple curricula often necessitated revisiting lesson content and continually reworking plans to address evolving learner needs (Berry, 2001; Veenman, 1996).

Additionally, teachers reported designing differentiated learning materials using locally available resources. This required both creativity and time. One participant explained that *"task cards and visuals"* allowed students to work independently at their level, particularly in remote schools with limited printed materials. However, the process was labor-intensive and sometimes overwhelming due to resource constraints.

Teachers also adopted flexible pacing strategies to allow learners to progress at their own pace according to their abilities. Fast learners advanced to enrichment tasks while others received reinforcement. These strategies collectively reflect a proactive, learner-responsive planning model essential for multigrade DI (Subban, 2006; Tomlinson, 2014).

Theme 2: Instructional Delivery

Instructional delivery in multigrade settings was described as highly adaptive, involving thematic instruction, ability grouping, and multimodal strategies. Teachers commonly organized lessons around broad themes that connected curricular content across grades. This not only reduced preparation time but also facilitated deeper learning connections. One teacher shared, *"Planning thematic lessons makes it easier to manage multiple grade levels in one go."*

Grouping students based on ability levels was another prevalent strategy. These groups rotated through teacher-led, peer-supported, and independent activities, enabling targeted instruction and self-paced learning. While effective, managing group rotations required careful coordination.

Many teachers integrated visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities to sustain engagement and accommodate learning preferences. The use of charts, manipulatives, and interactive games was a routine practice. However, technology use remained uneven, with some teachers embracing digital tools while others struggled due to infrastructure gaps and limited training (Nguyen & Habók, 2024; Uerz et al., 2018).

Formative assessments, such as performance tasks and observation checklists, were frequently used. Still, some participants noted difficulty in giving timely feedback due to the complexity of overseeing simultaneous learning tasks. As one teacher remarked, *"You're everywhere at once—you explain here, check there, and by the time you assess one group, the others are already asking questions."*

Theme 3: Classroom Management

Effective classroom management in multigrade DI revolved around establishing routines, promoting inclusivity, and managing transitions. Teachers emphasized the value of predictable structures that helped learners shift between tasks with minimal disruption. As one shared, *"When students know what to expect, they move more confidently—even if they're working on different things."*

Creating a supportive environment where students feel respected and empowered was another essential strategy. Teachers encouraged collaboration and celebrated small wins to build learner confidence. This aligns with the principles of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2016).

Spatial arrangements such as learning stations and quiet corners were used to facilitate independent and small-group work. However, classroom space was often limited, particularly in remote areas. One teacher described adapting by *"dividing the blackboard into zones"* to manage simultaneous activities.

Time management surfaced as a persistent challenge. Teachers balanced large-group instruction with individual support, often within tight schedules. Still, some noted that once routines were in place, students became more self-directed. One reflected, *"Eventually, they learn to manage their own learning—with a little help."*

Challenges Encountered by Multigrade Teachers

Theme 1: Instructional Planning

Multigrade teachers reported that instructional planning for differentiated instruction is labor-intensive and often overwhelming. The need to design multiple lesson versions tailored to various grade levels and learning profiles demands significant time, resourcefulness, and alignment with standards. Teachers described the constant tension between adapting to student needs and meeting curriculum expectations.

For instance, one teacher explained the difficulty of balancing alignment and flexibility: *"Planning must be flexible enough to cater to different learners, which means lessons are constantly being revised and adjusted."*

This concern echoes the complexity of integrating curriculum strands across levels, especially when learning competencies diverge significantly (Pozas et al., 2020; Tomlinson, 2014). The lack of instructional support materials further compounds the problem, especially in remote schools where resources are scarce. Teachers indicated they often needed to create differentiated worksheets or task cards from scratch, which adds to their workload.

Despite these challenges, some teachers acknowledged that DI, if adequately supported by collaboration and professional development, can ultimately improve teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Chapman & King, 2014).

Theme 2: Instructional Delivery

Delivering instruction in multigrade classrooms while differentiating content, process, and products proved physically and cognitively demanding for teachers. Many expressed difficulties managing different learning paces and instructional needs simultaneously, which often resulted in uneven student support.

As one teacher described: *"It is tiring to provide different explanations and activities all at once—some kids finish quickly, others need step-by-step guidance."*

Teachers frequently had to choose between attending to struggling learners or guiding advanced ones, sometimes sacrificing depth for coverage. The social-emotional maturity gaps among students also affected how they responded to DI. Younger pupils required constant supervision, while older ones sought autonomy, posing a challenge in maintaining consistency (Delos Reyes & Batoon, 2023).

The assessment process further exacerbated the burden. Teachers found it challenging to consistently monitor and evaluate students' learning through various methods and at different paces. These difficulties underscore the need for systems and tools that enable more efficient differentiation without compromising quality (Santamaria, 2009).

Theme 3: Classroom Management

Maintaining order and focus on a multigrade class while facilitating DI posed major classroom management challenges. Teachers highlighted that when students are engaged in different tasks, noise levels and disruptions often increase, especially if peer groups lack structure or if students need simultaneous attention.

“When I am focused on one group, the others may become noisy or distracted, especially if they finish their tasks early,” said one participant.

Teachers also cited the maturity gaps between grade levels as a source of imbalance in group work. Older students sometimes dominated discussions, while younger learners struggled to keep up or lost confidence (Shareefa, 2022). This imbalance not only disrupted peer collaboration but also strained teacher authority, especially in mixed-ability and mixed-behavioral classrooms.

Physical constraints, such as limited space and time, were also prevalent. Overcrowded classrooms and rigid schedules hindered teachers from conducting effective small group sessions or providing individualized feedback (Nguyen & Habók, 2024). Despite these barriers, a few participants shared that when routines are clearly established and students are taught self-regulation skills, DI can nurture learner independence and responsibility, particularly in older students (Tomlinson, 2014; Singh et al., 2024).

Improve the Application of Differentiated Instruction in a Multigrade Learning Environment

Improving differentiated instruction (DI) in multigrade settings requires strategic planning, resource efficiency, collaborative support, and instructional flexibility. Teachers have emphasized the empowering nature of lesson structures that remain adaptable to the varied needs of learners across different grade levels. Rotational models—featuring teacher-led groups, independent seatwork, hands-on activities, and digital stations—were frequently cited as effective. These approaches enabled teachers to engage students at different levels without fragmenting instructional flow. As one participant explained, *“Using small groups that rotate through different stations makes it easier to address individual needs while keeping all students actively engaged.”*

Tiered tasks and springboard activities were common tools. These allowed for differentiated pacing, enabling advanced learners to pursue enrichment while others received reinforcement. These practices reflect Tomlinson’s (2014) model of tiered instruction and align with Goyibova et al.’s (2025) findings on learner-responsive designs.

Improving differentiated instruction in multigrade classrooms requires a strategic approach that balances structure with flexibility, enabling teachers to meet the diverse needs of students across grade levels. Teachers emphasized the importance of well-organized lesson planning, access to resources, and continuous professional development to manage this complexity, aligning with Subban’s (2006) research that emphasizes the need for instructional scaffolds to support differentiation in diverse classrooms.

Proposed Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT)

Subsequently, this information was utilized to craft the multigrade DI performance appraisal tool. Tables 1-3 outline the indicators that delineate teachers’ competencies within each teaching component. To ensure the tool’s appropriateness and effectiveness in assessing DI performance, it underwent validation through the evaluation and critique of five (5) experts who are purposively selected based on their extensive experience and specialization in multigrade education and differentiated instruction. The experts involved in this validation process included multigrade program coordinators, education program supervisors, and multigrade school principals from different regions across the country.

This section outlines the three key components of teaching that are essential for promoting effective, differentiated, multigrade instruction: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and classroom management. The participants emphasized the importance of understanding and establishing measures and indicators for each teaching component to improve the implementation of differentiated instruction in multigrade schools. Research supports the significance of structured differentiation in addressing diverse learning needs, optimizing teacher effectiveness, and improving student outcomes in multigrade settings (Goyibova et al., 2025; Kalinowski et al., 2024).

Each competency indicator within the three domains (Instructional Planning, Instructional Delivery, and Classroom Management) can be scored using a 4-point Likert scale, allowing for both formative and summative evaluation.

Table 1. Assessment Dimension: Instructional Planning

Score	Descriptor	Description
4	Highly Evident	Competency is consistently demonstrated with clear, concrete evidence
3	Evident	Competency is demonstrated, but may lack consistency or full integration
2	Minimally Evident	Competency is occasionally demonstrated with limited supporting evidence
1	Not Evident	Competency is not demonstrated or observable during evaluation

Table 1. Continued

This component assesses teachers' knowledge and skills in planning and designing differentiated multigrade instructional plans using the national curriculum.

Competency

The teacher . . .

- prepares multigrade differentiated daily lesson plans.
 - sets lesson objectives aligned with the K to 12 Curriculum, pupils' context, and learning needs.
 - uses individual pupils' formative assessment data consistently to plan differentiated instruction for content mastery, pacing, and transitions.
 - differentiates learning plans considering the content, process, and product.
 - develops differentiated learning plans for each grade to accommodate pupils' learning needs and capabilities, reflecting both individual and group interests, ability levels, and learning styles.
 - includes various performance tasks or activities to assess students' mastery of lesson content.
 - includes various performance indicators for pupils to demonstrate evidence of learning (e.g., tiered assessment at the formative stage of assessment, choice of culminating products).
-

Instructional planning, as discussed in this study, involves the systematic planning and preparation of differentiated, multigrade lesson plans that utilize the necessary instructional resources and techniques. The establishment of measures and competencies is crucial for assessing teachers' knowledge and skills in planning and designing multigrade, differentiated instructional plans that align with the national curriculum. This planning process requires the teacher's ability to identify lesson objectives from the K to 12 Curriculum and translate curriculum content into learning activities that cater to individual learning needs based on formal and informal assessments of students' learning and principles of differentiated instruction. Teachers are expected to apply professional knowledge to plan and design multigrade lessons that incorporate instructional and assessment strategies and resources to facilitate students' participation in the class, understanding of concepts, and achievement of learning objectives across grade levels.

Table 2.A. Assessment Dimension: Instructional Delivery (Use of Teaching Strategies and Approaches)

This component evaluates the teacher's knowledge and skills in differentiating instruction through the use of a diverse range of instructional strategies and approaches that are responsive to students' learning differences and preferences.

Competency

The teacher . . .

- prioritizes what content pupils are expected to learn.
 - uses differentiated instructional strategies that provide pupils with easy access to the content (e.g., audio, video, visuals, guide notes, technological assistance).
 - engages and maintains pupils in active learning.
 - provides collaborative and learner-centered learning opportunities for pupils to work individually, in pairs, in small groups, and in whole class.
 - reinforces learning goals consistently throughout the lessons.
-

Table 2.B. Assessment Dimension: Instructional Delivery (Use of Learning Activities and Materials)

This component assesses the teacher's knowledge and skills in differentiating instruction through the use of a wide variety of learning activities and instructional resources that are responsive to learners' needs, interests, and learning styles.

Competency

- The teacher . . .
 - provides learning activities and materials that are appropriate for the learner's age, grade, ability levels, interests, and learning styles.
 - provides learning activities that enable learners to engage with or make sense of the content based on their interests, needs, learning styles, and other factors.
 - provides learners with appropriately challenging learning tasks (e.g., questioning, student work).
 - uses technology (such as iPads, laptops, smartphones, smart TVs, computers, OHP, LCD, and the internet) to enhance learning by teaching the lesson.
 - uses contextualized materials to reinforce learning.
-

Table 2.C. Assessment Dimension: Instructional Delivery (Use of Assessment Strategies and Techniques)

This component assesses teachers' knowledge and skills in differentiating instruction through the use of effective assessment strategies and tools to diagnose and evaluate learners' learning in a manner consistent with curriculum requirements.

Competency

The teacher . . .

- aligns student assessment with the K-12 curriculum standards and competencies prescribed for each grade.
 - uses a variety of assessment strategies throughout the lesson, including informal checks, questions, observation, and assignments.
 - provides differentiated assessment tasks to pupils to check for understanding of the lesson.
 - provides assessment tasks that are sensitive to pupil diversity, including interests, abilities, learning styles, and culture.
 - allows pupils to demonstrate understanding of the lesson using different mediums (for example, presenting information through a video clip as opposed to a written piece, role-play, dance, and other performance tasks).
 - uses assessment tools for both formative and summative purposes to inform, guide, and adjust pupils' learning.
 - modifies assessment tasks to accommodate pupils' learning needs.
 - involves pupils in monitoring their own progress.
 - gives constructive and frequent feedback to pupils about their learning.
-

The instructional delivery component assesses teachers' ability to differentiate instruction using a wide range of instructional and assessment strategies, along with learning resources, including multimedia materials. This is done to accommodate differences among students and ensure that every student has the chance to master the lesson being taught. It is expected that teachers will utilize developmentally appropriate strategies and resources to engage students and actively enhance their learning experience.

Table 3. Assessment Dimension: Classroom Management

This component assesses the teacher's knowledge and skills in establishing, communicating, and maintaining clear expectations for student behavior through the use of effective routines, procedures, and techniques that consistently encourage students to engage and sustain their interest in performing learning activities in the classroom.

Competency

The teacher . . .

- arranges tables and seats to accommodate pupils' work and learning needs.
 - establishes classroom rules, procedures, expectations, and routines that are consistently and fairly enforced.
 - establishes teacher's schedules that indicate a systematic plan for the lesson activities.
 - practices the teacher's role as a facilitator and participant in the teaching and learning process.
 - uses grouping strategies in various ways (e.g., whole group, small groups, partners, heterogeneous and homogeneous groups) with tasks designed to develop the necessary skills expected from the group activity.
 - interacts with all the different groups throughout the lesson.
 - monitors group participation and involvement to ensure learners' learning progress and provides feedback.
 - uses learning centers as learners' working stations based on interests, needs, or choices.
 - maximizes instructional learning time by giving equal time to work with learners individually as well as in small groups.
 - promotes a child-friendly learning environment where everyone feels valued and recognized by respecting each other's diversity.
-

The classroom management component assesses the teacher's proficiency in establishing, communicating, and maintaining clear expectations for student behavior through the use of effective routines, procedures, and techniques. These strategies aimed to consistently motivate students to actively participate and sustain their interest in learning activities within a multigrade classroom setting. In managing multigrade classrooms, teachers should create an environment conducive to learning by establishing behavioral norms, strategically planning the utilization of classroom space, designing engaging activities, and effectively utilizing teaching and learning materials. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are fully engaged and motivated to achieve academic excellence.

Discussion

Teachers' Experiences in Teaching a Multigrade Class

The findings of this study reveal that the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in multigrade classrooms centers on three (3) core themes: instructional planning, instructional delivery, and classroom management.

Teachers shared rich insights from their lived experiences, emphasizing the unique challenges and practical strategies involved in teaching students across multiple grade levels within a single classroom setting.

A clear takeaway was that differentiated planning in multigrade settings depends on the teacher's ability to adapt instruction based on diagnostic profiling, with several participants emphasizing the role of early assessments to tailor pacing and content. This aligns with Tomlinson's (2014) emphasis on learner readiness but also underscores the resourcefulness required in under-resourced schools. The adaptation of local materials and task cards reflects not only pedagogical flexibility but also culturally responsive innovation, a principle echoed by Santamaria (2009).

A notable tension emerged regarding the use of technology. While DI literature often highlights digital tools as catalysts for inclusion (Nguyen & Habók, 2024), some teachers described technology as more aspirational than practical. Limited infrastructure and inadequate training meant that, in some cases, tech integration deepened inequities rather than reducing them. This contradicts optimistic portrayals of edtech and suggests a critical need for context-sensitive digital policies.

Instructional delivery was marked by creative adaptations, such as thematic units and flexible grouping; however, teachers reported experiencing emotional and cognitive fatigue when juggling multiple grade-level expectations. This strain reflects Chapman and King's (2014) findings on DI workload, but participants also revealed a coping mechanism through peer collaboration, which is underemphasized in the mainstream DI literature. As one teacher noted, *"Sometimes it is not the planning that's difficult—it is doing it alone."*

Accordingly, the widespread use of flexible routines was more than a management technique; it enabled learners to navigate complex multigrade environments independently. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and supports Booth and Ainscow's (2016) framework for inclusive learning. However, the tension between independence and guidance, especially with younger learners, raises questions about the developmental appropriateness of learner autonomy models in DI for early grade levels.

The Department of Education of the Philippines, SEAMEO INNOTECH, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s review of multigrade practices through the Multigrade Program in Philippine Education (MPPE) also emphasizes peer learning and instructional innovations as effective strategies in improving learning outcomes (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020). These findings align with the current study, which highlights the importance of collaborative mechanisms, especially in resource-constrained environments. Furthermore, the MPPE review advocates for expanding multigrade coverage to indigenous and geographically isolated communities, particularly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). This underscores the necessity for differentiated instruction models to be responsive to contextual inequities and for local government units (LGUs) to play a crucial role in identifying communities for the establishment of multigrade schools.

This study reinforces the value of contextualized, practice-based models for DI in multigrade settings. Beyond theoretical alignment, teacher narratives emphasized the importance of professional development, shared networks, and instructional autonomy. Future training must move beyond generic workshops to targeted, multigrade-specific coaching.

Moreover, while DI is widely promoted in policy, the study underscores the gap between policy intent and classroom reality, particularly in underfunded, rural schools. If DI succeeds in multigrade classrooms, systemic support, monitoring mechanisms, and equitable access to resources must be prioritized alongside pedagogical training.

Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool

The Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT) was developed in response to the challenges, strategies, and priorities identified by multigrade teachers in this study. Drawing on rich empirical data from Focus Group Interviews (FGIs) with experienced multigrade teachers and grounded in the theoretical principles of differentiated instruction (Booth & Ainscow, 2016; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023), the tool offers a practical, structured, contextually relevant framework for evaluating and improving DI practices in Philippine multigrade classrooms, empowering teachers to enhance their teaching methods.

Unlike generic observation tools, the MDI-PAT is designed by and for multigrade teachers, integrating real classroom insights into three (3) essential and interconnected dimensions: (1) Instructional Planning; (2) Instructional Delivery; and (3) Classroom Management. Each dimension contains clearly defined competency indicators that describe the expected knowledge, skills, and behaviors of teachers implementing differentiated instruction (DI) in multigrade settings. The design of the tool prioritizes clarity, applicability, and relevance, allowing it to serve both as an evaluative measure and as a guide for professional reflection and growth.

Instructional planning is the foundational pillar of the tool, emphasizing the importance of designing lesson plans that align with curriculum standards while responding to learners' individual contexts and needs. As outlined in Table 1, the competencies under this dimension include preparing differentiated multigrade lesson plans, aligning objectives with the K to 12 curricula, and consistently using formative assessment data to inform instruction. Teachers are expected to differentiate content, processes, and products based on students' readiness levels, learning profiles, and interests. The

inclusion of performance-based tasks and tiered assessments further ensures that all learners have equitable opportunities to demonstrate understanding and mastery of content.

The instructional delivery component is subdivided into three critical areas: teaching strategies and approaches, learning activities and materials, and assessment techniques (Tables 2A–2C). Competencies in this domain focus on the effective implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) through multimodal instruction, collaborative learning opportunities, and clear reinforcement of learning goals. Teachers are expected to prioritize essential content, use differentiated resources such as audio-visual aids and contextualized materials, and integrate appropriate technology to enhance access to learning. The tool also outlines the importance of differentiated assessment, where teachers employ varied strategies—such as formative checks, performance tasks, and student-led assessments—to evaluate understanding while being sensitive to learners’ diverse cultural, cognitive, and expressive needs.

The third dimension, classroom management (Table 3), evaluates teachers’ ability to create a structured, inclusive, and child-friendly learning environment. Competency indicators in this section include the effective arrangement of seating and learning centers, the establishment of fair and consistent routines, and the use of flexible grouping strategies to accommodate a range of learning needs. Emphasis is placed on the teacher’s role as both a facilitator and participant in the learning process, ensuring that learners are meaningfully engaged throughout the lesson. A well-managed classroom fosters not only academic success but also a positive socio-emotional climate where students feel respected, safe, and motivated to learn.

To ensure the relevance and validity of the MDI-PAT, the tool was reviewed by eight experts, composed of multigrade program coordinators, education program supervisors, and school principals from various regions in the Philippines. With extensive experience in supervising and implementing differentiated instruction in multigrade settings, these experts provided detailed feedback on the tool’s content, structure, and language. Their input helped refine the clarity of indicators, ensure alignment with the K to 12 curricula, and enhance contextual applicability. They also recommended adjustments to the tool’s usability for both teacher self-assessment and supervisory evaluation. This expert validation process significantly strengthened the tool’s credibility and practical value for improving DI implementation in Philippine multigrade classrooms.

Overall, the MDI-PAT provides a comprehensive, practical, and research-informed framework for assessing teacher proficiency in differentiated instruction within the multigrade context. It not only promotes reflective teaching but also serves as a potential resource for school leaders and policymakers seeking to improve instructional quality, equity, and learning outcomes in multigrade schools across the Philippines.

Conclusion

This study contributes novel insights into the landscape of differentiated instruction (DI) by contextualizing its implementation within the complexities of Philippine multigrade classrooms, an area underrepresented in the existing literature. This study revealed that the successful implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in multigrade classrooms is anchored on three (3) interconnected pillars: Instructional Planning, Instructional Delivery, and Classroom Management. Teachers shared practical strategies and challenges derived from their daily classroom experiences, reinforcing that multigrade teaching is both resource-intensive and pedagogically complex.

The importance of early learner assessment, curriculum mapping, and the use of contextualized materials emerged as critical planning strategies, especially in under-resourced schools. Meanwhile, instructional delivery relied heavily on flexible grouping, thematic instruction, and multimodal strategies, which allowed teachers to address varied readiness levels. Classroom management was not merely logistical but foundational, enabling differentiated instruction to occur within a structured and inclusive environment.

Findings suggest that differentiated instruction in multigrade settings cannot be generalized from single-grade models. Teachers require specialized training, context-specific support tools, and collaborative networks to sustain DI practices. The emotional and cognitive fatigue reported by many participants underscores the necessity for ongoing professional learning, ideally conducted through peer-based mechanisms rather than one-time workshops.

While some participants described technology as a helpful supplement, others highlighted digital divides and infrastructure gaps, revealing that edtech remains unevenly accessible. This calls for context-sensitive digital integration policies that take into account the unique realities of rural and remote schools.

Most notably, this research introduces the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT)—a validated, practice-informed framework co-developed with experts. The tool addresses the absence of tailored evaluative instruments for multigrade DI and offers a scalable model for both self-assessment and instructional supervision. Its indicators bridge theory and practice, promoting reflection, accountability, and professional growth.

Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in multigrade classrooms, it is essential that teachers continually improve their competencies across instructional planning, delivery, and classroom management. Teachers must recognize the interconnectedness of these domains and how they collectively support inclusive and learner-centered instruction.

Instructional planning should be enriched through regular learner profiling and comprehensive curriculum mapping that aligns competencies across grade levels. Teachers should also engage in dynamic and ongoing learner assessments to monitor readiness, interests, and progress, thereby allowing them to make timely instructional adjustments and ensure that learning gaps are addressed proactively.

Effective delivery requires ongoing professional development in multimodal strategies, thematic teaching, and the use of appropriate local and digital resources. Teachers should employ flexible grouping and scaffolded tasks while utilizing tools such as offline videos, teacher-made audio recordings, and educational apps to enrich instruction, especially in remote settings.

Classroom management must also be reinforced through the establishment of predictable routines, collaborative norms, and physical arrangements that support independent and small-group learning. Teachers should cultivate inclusive environments that encourage peer interaction, student autonomy, and respectful behavior. Practical strategies such as learning stations, rotational models, and clear task assignments are especially effective in managing the complex dynamics of multigrade classrooms. Moreover, fostering a culture of mutual support among students can ease the instructional burden on teachers and enhance student motivation and participation.

The strategic use of formative and summative assessments is crucial for tracking student learning and informing differentiated instruction. Teachers should be trained in designing, interpreting, and utilizing various assessment tools to guide instructional decisions and provide targeted feedback. This includes the integration of diagnostic tools and performance-based tasks that reflect real-world competencies and support individualized learning pathways.

Lastly, it is recommended that schools adopt and sustain the use of the Multigrade Differentiated Instruction Performance Appraisal Tool (MDI-PAT). This tool supports teacher self-assessment, aligns with real classroom challenges, and guides targeted professional development. Institutional support, including mentoring and peer collaboration, is also essential for sustaining DI practices in multigrade settings. By prioritizing these recommendations, educators can elevate the quality of instruction in multigrade classrooms and ensure more equitable, engaging, and effective learning experiences for all students.

Limitations

This study, while providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of Differentiated Instruction (DI) in multigrade classrooms, has several limitations that should be addressed in future research, especially, its qualitative design. One major limitation is the dependence on self-reported data from teachers about their instructional planning, delivery, and classroom management practices. As the study utilized interviews and focus group discussions, the subjective nature of qualitative data means that personal biases, such as social desirability bias, could influence teachers' responses. Teachers may have presented their practices in a more favorable light, which could have affected the accuracy and reliability of the findings. Future qualitative research could mitigate this limitation by incorporating multiple data sources, such as student or peer feedback, to cross-check and validate the teachers' self-reported practices.

Another limitation is the sampling scope. Although the study included teachers from various regions in the Philippines, it may not fully capture the experiences of educators from more remote or underserved areas, where unique challenges related to DI implementation may exist. Future studies could employ a more stratified sampling approach to ensure that teachers from both urban and rural settings are adequately represented. This would enable a more nuanced understanding of how regional disparities, including access to resources and training, influence the adoption and effectiveness of DI. Additionally, a comparative analysis of regional differences in DI implementation could provide insights into how different areas of the Philippines adapt the DI framework to address localized needs.

The study also did not include direct classroom observations, which is a common limitation in qualitative research. While teachers' reflections on their practices provide valuable qualitative data, direct observations would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how DI strategies are used in the classroom. Future research could incorporate participant observation to add depth to the findings and objectively verify whether the practices teachers match their actual classroom behaviors. This would help overcome the gap between teachers' perceptions and real classroom practices.

Furthermore, the study did not measure student outcomes, which is an important aspect of assessing the effectiveness of DI strategies. While qualitative research focuses on the experiences and perceptions of participants, incorporating student performance data—such as grades, test scores, or other learning assessments—would provide a more complete

picture of the impact of DI on student learning. Future studies could include longitudinal assessments to track student progress over time and determine whether DI practices contribute to improved learning outcomes.

Finally, the limitations related to resources, particularly access to educational technology, may have influenced the extent to which teachers could effectively implement DI. In rural areas, where access to technology and training may be limited, teachers might not be able to fully utilize DI strategies that rely on digital tools and resources. Future research could explore the impact of resource constraints on DI implementation in more detail, examining how teachers in resource-poor settings adapt their practices or identifying strategies that could help bridge the resource gap.

Overall, while this study provides important insights into differentiated instruction (DI) in multigrade classrooms, addressing these limitations in future research could help refine and improve the understanding and application of DI strategies across diverse educational contexts.

Ethics Statements

The study involved human subjects and was reviewed and approved by the Ethics and Review Committee of the University of Santo Tomas Graduate School. The participants signed an informed consent to participate in the study.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher funded the study, indicating that there was no conflict of interest on the part of the authors.

Generative AI Statement

This study acknowledges the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) as a generative AI tool to assist in refining language, organizing content, and enhancing clarity. Specifically, ChatGPT was utilized to rephrase sentences for coherence, improve readability, and structure discussions based on peer review feedback. However, all conceptualizations, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this article remain the sole responsibility of the author. The use of AI did not involve the generation of original research content, data analysis, or critical academic arguments. The author affirms compliance with ethical guidelines and AI usage conditions, ensuring that the final manuscript reflects their scholarly work and intellectual contributions.

References

- Berry, C. (2001). Achievement effects of multigrade and monograde primary schools in the Turks and Caicos Islands. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 21(6), 537-552. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0738-0593\(01\)00014-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0738-0593(01)00014-1)
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2016). *Index for inclusion: A guide to school development led by inclusive values* (4th ed.). Index for Inclusion Network.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bunga, J. B. (2025). Assessing teacher proficiency in differentiated instruction: Development and validation of a performance appraisal tool for Philippine multigrade classrooms. *European Journal of Educational Management*, 8(1), 31-47. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eujem.8.1.31>
- Chapman, C., & King, R. (2014). *Planning and organizing standards-based differentiated instruction* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452299549.n4>
- Delos Reyes, C. C., & Batoon, E. D. (2023). Exploring the emotional geographies of teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-principal interactions: Toward educational management policy formulation. *European Journal of Educational Management*, 6(4), 233-245. <https://doi.org/10.12973/eujem.6.4.233>
- SEAMEO INNOTECH. (2020). *A review of the current situation and practices of multigrade schools in the Philippines: Summary report*. <http://bit.ly/44hlyQf>
- Goyibova, N., Muslimov, N., Sabirova, G., Kadirova, N., & Samatova, B. (2025). Differentiation approach in education: Tailoring instruction for diverse learner needs. *MethodsX*, 14, Article 103163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mex.2025.103163>
- Kalinowski, E., Westphal, A., Jurczok, A., & Vock, M. (2024). The essential role of teacher self-efficacy and enthusiasm for differentiated instruction. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 148, Article 104663. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104663>
- Little, A. W., Pridmore, P., Bajracharya, H., & Vithanapathirana, M. (2006). Learning and teaching in multigrade settings (LATIMS): A final report to DFID. <http://bit.ly/44Ohsis>

- Magableh, I. S., & Abdullah, A. (2022). Differentiated instruction effectiveness on the secondary stage students' reading comprehension proficiency level in Jordan. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 11(1), 459-466. <https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v11i1.21971>
- Mengistie, S. M. (2020). Primary school teachers' knowledge, attitude, and practice of differentiated instruction. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 12(1), 98-114. <https://ijci.net/index.php/IJCI/article/view/258>
- Nguyen, L. A. T., & Habók, A. (2024). Tools for assessing teacher digital literacy: A review. *Journal of Computers in Education*, 11, 305-346. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40692-022-00257-5>
- OpenAI. (2025). ChatGPT (Feb 2025 version) [Large language model]. <https://openai.com>
- Pozas, M., Letzel, V., & Schneider, C. (2020). Teachers and differentiated instruction: Exploring differentiation practices to address student diversity. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 20(3), 217-230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12481>
- Republic Act no. 10533. (2013). <http://bit.ly/3I5bbpT>
- Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2011). *Practice teaching: A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139151535>
- Rondero, C. P. M. G., & Casupanan, I. H. (2024). Challenges and Opportunities in Multigrade Teaching: Experiences of Primary School Teachers in Far-Flung Schools. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 5(12), 5162-5174. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.05.12.19>
- Santamaria, L. J. (2009). Culturally responsive differentiated instruction: Narrowing gaps between best pedagogical practices benefiting all learners. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 214-247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100105>
- Shareefa, M. (2022). Demystifying the impact of teachers' qualification and experience on implementation of differentiated instruction. *International Journal of Instruction*, 16(1), 393-416. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2023.16122a>
- Singh, M., Sun, D., & Zheng, Z. (2024). Enhancing university students' learning performance in a metaverse-enabled immersive learning environment for STEM education: A community of inquiry approach. *Future in Educational Research*, 2(3), 288-309. <https://doi.org/10.1002/fer3.56>
- Subban, P. K. (2006). Differentiated instruction: A research basis. *International Education Journal*, 7(7), 935-947.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners* (2nd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <http://bit.ly/44ypmvl>
- Tomlinson, C. A., & Imbeau, M. B. (2023). *Leading and managing a differentiated classroom*. (2nd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. <https://bit.ly/4hTc7uz>
- Uerz, D., Volman, M., & Kral, M. (2018). Teacher educators' competencies in fostering student teachers' proficiency in teaching and learning with technology: An overview of relevant research literature. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 70, 12-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.11.005>
- Valiande, S., & Koutselini, M. I. (2009, June 25-26). *Application and evaluation of Differentiation instruction in mixed ability classrooms* [Paper presentation]. 4th Hellenic Observatory PhD Symposium, London School of Economics, London, UK.
- Veenman, S. (1996). Effects of Multigrade and Multi-Age classes reconsidered. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 323-340. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543066003323>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4>
- Whitley, J., Gooderham, S., Duquette, C., Orders, S., & Cousins, J. B. (2019). Implementing differentiated instruction: A mixed-methods exploration of teacher beliefs and practices. *Teachers and Teaching*, 25(8), 1043-1061. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1699782>