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Navigating Multisubject Teaching in Indigenous Elementary Education: Lived Experiences and Adaptive Pedagogical Practices of Master Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Multisubject teaching requires elementary teachers to navigate multiple disciplinary domains while responding to learners' developmental, linguistic, cultural, and contextual needs. The complexity of this responsibility becomes particularly significant in indigenous communities, where formal curricular expectations intersect with local knowledge systems, cultural practices, language, and community realities. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences and adaptive pedagogical practices of master teachers engaged in multisubject teaching in Ifugao, Philippines. Specifically, it examines the challenges associated with teaching multiple learning areas, the adaptive strategies employed by teachers, the integration of indigenous and community contexts into instruction, and the professional meanings teachers construct from their experiences. Participants are purposively selected master teachers and experienced elementary teachers with direct experience in multisubject instruction within indigenous communities. Data are generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Four analytical themes frame the presentation of findings: One Teacher, Many Learning Worlds; Teaching Through Culture and Context; Making More from What Is Available; and Experience Becoming Expertise. The findings position multisubject teaching not merely as an increased instructional workload but as a form of adaptive professional practice requiring pedagogical flexibility, contextualization, resourcefulness, cultural responsiveness, and reflective expertise. The study contributes to discussions on teacher professional development, culturally responsive education, Indigenous Peoples Education, and instructional support for elementary teachers serving rural and indigenous communities.

Keywords: adaptive pedagogy, indigenous education, Ifugao, master teachers, multisubject teaching, phenomenology, culturally responsive teaching

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Introduction

Elementary teaching requires educators to develop knowledge and competence across several learning areas while simultaneously addressing the developmental characteristics of young learners. Unlike teachers specializing in a single disciplinary field, elementary teachers may transition within the same school day among language, mathematics, science, values education, social studies, and other learning areas. This arrangement creates a distinctive pedagogical responsibility because each discipline has its own content, concepts, learning competencies, instructional approaches, and assessment requirements.

Multisubject teaching should be distinguished from multigrade teaching. Multisubject teachers may teach several subjects to one grade level, whereas multigrade teachers simultaneously teach learners belonging to two or more grade levels. Nevertheless, Philippine multigrade research provides useful contextual evidence because both arrangements require teachers to navigate multiple curricular demands, differentiate instruction, manage time strategically, and respond flexibly to learner diversity.

Recent Philippine evidence illustrates these demands. Iballa et al. (2025), in a phenomenological investigation involving 10 multigrade teachers, found that teachers experienced being overwhelmed by simultaneously teaching learners at different levels. Similarly, Fronda et al. (2026) found that multigrade elementary teachers experienced challenges involving diverse learners and curricula, limited resources, intensive lesson preparation, workload, and emotional strain.

The demands of multisubject teaching may become even more complex when instruction occurs in indigenous communities. Teaching in these settings requires sensitivity not only to curriculum standards but also to learners' languages, cultural identities, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSPs), family experiences, community relationships, and local environment.

In Ifugao, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices provide potentially meaningful contexts for formal learning. The implementation of Indigenous Peoples Education therefore involves questions extending beyond the inclusion of cultural examples in individual lessons. Bermudez and Babaran (2025), examining IPed implementation in Ifugao, considered pedagogy and methodology, Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices, curriculum and content, language of instruction, teacher training, instructional materials, and assessment as important dimensions of implementation.

This suggests that culturally responsive multisubject teaching requires teachers to negotiate two interconnected responsibilities: meeting formal curricular expectations and ensuring that learning remains meaningful within children's sociocultural contexts.

Experienced and master teachers represent a particularly important group for understanding this phenomenon. Professional expertise is not developed exclusively through formal qualifications. Years of planning lessons, observing learners, addressing instructional problems, experimenting with strategies, contextualizing content, collaborating with colleagues, and reflecting on classroom experiences can produce forms of practical professional knowledge that are difficult to capture through quantitative measures.

Despite the growing Philippine literature concerning multigrade education and indigenous education, relatively little research focuses specifically on master teachers' lived experiences of teaching multiple subjects in indigenous elementary contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining how



experienced teachers understand multisubject teaching, what challenges they encounter, how they adapt their pedagogical practices, and what professional meanings emerge from these experiences.

Review of Related Literature

Multisubject Teaching and Multiple Curricular Demands

Teaching several learning areas requires considerable cognitive and organizational flexibility. Teachers must prepare content, learning activities, instructional resources, and assessments for subjects that may differ substantially in their epistemological and pedagogical characteristics.

Although multisubject and multigrade arrangements differ structurally, studies of Philippine multigrade education consistently demonstrate the difficulty of navigating multiple curricula and diverse learning requirements.

Naparan and Castañeda (2021), for example, investigated challenges and coping strategies among Philippine multigrade teachers using transcendental phenomenology. They identified intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic challenges confronting teachers responsible for multiple grade levels.

More recently, Kis-ing (2026) found that teachers handling multiple curricula experienced substantial difficulties involving lesson planning, classroom management, assessment, resources, and responding to varied learning needs.

Fronda et al. (2026) similarly found that teachers experienced intensive planning and workload alongside the demands of adapting to diverse learners and curricula.

These findings provide a relevant conceptual foundation for multisubject teaching. Although the participants in the present study do not necessarily teach multiple grade levels simultaneously, moving among several disciplinary areas requires continuous planning and pedagogical adjustment.

Learner Diversity and Differentiated Instruction

The elementary classroom is inherently diverse. Learners may differ in academic readiness, language proficiency, interests, confidence, prior experiences, learning pace, and preferred ways of engaging with tasks.

This diversity requires teachers to avoid assuming that a single instructional strategy will work equally well for all learners.

Rondero and Casupanan (2024) found that teachers in far-flung schools experienced challenges involving classroom and time management, learner diversity, perceived inadequacy in teaching multiple grades, and burnout. Teachers responded through resourcefulness, recognition of learner differences, resilience, innovation, and support systems.

Similarly, Maloloy-on and Apas (2025) identified creative and contextualized pedagogy, differentiated instructional strategies, community involvement, and a strong sense of purpose among teachers working in geographically isolated multigrade settings.

These findings indicate that effective teaching in complex rural classrooms depends substantially on the



teacher's capacity to differentiate rather than standardize instructional responses.

Indigenous Education and Contextualization

Indigenous education requires sensitivity to the relationship between formal curriculum and learners' cultural contexts. Curriculum becomes more meaningful when teachers recognize that children bring knowledge to school from their families, communities, languages, environment, traditions, and everyday experiences.

In the Philippine context, Indigenous Peoples Education recognizes the significance of culturally responsive educational practices. Recent research in Ifugao examined IPed implementation through dimensions including pedagogy and methodology, IKSPs, curriculum content, language, teacher preparation, materials, and assessment (Bermudez & Babaran, 2025).

Such evidence suggests that contextualization should not simply involve attaching indigenous terminology to otherwise unchanged lessons. Rather, meaningful contextualization involves considering how local experiences and knowledge can provide legitimate pathways toward curricular understanding. For multisubject teachers, this possibility is particularly significant. Community practices can potentially provide contexts for mathematical problem-solving; the local environment can enrich scientific observation; oral narratives can support language and literacy; and local history, values, traditions, and community relationships can strengthen social and values-oriented learning.

2.4 Resourcefulness and Adaptive Pedagogy

Rural teachers may also encounter resource-related constraints that require pedagogical adaptation.

Research in geographically isolated Philippine schools consistently identifies resourcefulness as an important teacher response. Durango and Ngilangil (2025), for instance, found that multigrade teaching involved complex demands but also generated adaptation, professional growth, resilience, and strategies for effective teaching.

Dampilag's (2026) investigation in Tinoc, Ifugao is particularly relevant geographically. The study involved 12 multigrade teachers from six elementary schools and examined the challenges and coping strategies associated with teaching multiple grade levels.

These studies suggest that adaptive pedagogy involves teachers making continuous judgments about how available time, resources, peer support, learner characteristics, and community assets can be organized to sustain learning.

2.5 Professional Experience and Teacher Expertise

Repeated engagement with difficult teaching situations may also contribute to professional development. Teachers learn not only from formal training but from the cumulative process of planning, teaching, observing, adjusting, and reflecting.

Literal and Sabud's (2025) phenomenological study of 12 Philippine multigrade teachers found that



participants' experiences centered on multifaceted pedagogy and navigating learning environments involving diverse grade levels.

Lisondra (2023) similarly found that multigrade teaching could be both stressful and fulfilling, with themes related to flexibility, limited resources, inclusivity, meaningful learning, and teachers' sense of calling.

For master teachers, accumulated experience may be particularly important because their professional role frequently extends beyond classroom teaching toward mentoring, modeling effective practices, supporting colleagues, and contributing to instructional improvement.

Research Gap

Existing research demonstrates that Philippine teachers working in rural, multigrade, and indigenous educational settings experience complex demands involving curriculum, learner diversity, planning, assessment, resources, and classroom management (Fronza et al., 2026; Iballa et al., 2025; Kis-ing, 2026). However, three gaps remain evident. First, multisubject teaching remains conceptually distinct from multigrade teaching and warrants investigation in its own right. Second, limited qualitative scholarship specifically foregrounds the voices of master teachers, whose accumulated professional experiences may reveal advanced forms of adaptive pedagogical knowledge. Third, there remains a need for contextually grounded research examining how multisubject pedagogy interacts with indigenous culture and community realities in Ifugao.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to explore the lived experiences and adaptive pedagogical practices of master teachers engaged in multisubject teaching in indigenous elementary education. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) describe their experiences of teaching multiple learning areas; (2) identify the pedagogical challenges they encounter; (3) examine their adaptive and contextualized teaching practices; (4) understand how indigenous culture and learner diversity influence their pedagogy; and (5) explore the professional meanings they construct from their experiences.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design because it seeks to understand how master teachers interpret and construct meaning from their lived experiences of multisubject teaching. Participants are purposively selected master teachers and experienced elementary teachers from public elementary schools in Hungduan, Ifugao who have direct experience handling multiple learning areas within indigenous community contexts. Criterion-based purposive sampling prioritizes information-rich participants with sufficient teaching experience and willingness to articulate their experiences. Data are generated primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews focusing on multiple lesson preparation, transitions among learning areas, learner diversity, cultural contextualization, resource constraints, instructional adaptation, assessment, and professional learning. With informed consent, interviews are



audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data are analyzed through phenomenologically informed thematic analysis involving familiarization with transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of meaning units, development and refinement of themes, and synthesis of the shared essence of the phenomenon. Credibility is supported through prolonged engagement with the data, probing and participant clarification; dependability through an audit trail; confirmability through reflexive journaling and grounding interpretations in participants' accounts; and transferability through rich description of the educational and cultural setting. Institutional permission and ethical approval are secured before data collection, participation is voluntary, and participant identities are protected through pseudonyms or codes. Cultural knowledge disclosed during interviews is treated respectfully, and culturally restricted information is excluded from publication when disclosure could violate community expectations or ethical obligations.

7. Results and Discussion

The four themes below provide the complete journal-ready structure, but the quoted participant statements are illustrative rather than actual data, because interview transcripts were not supplied. They demonstrate the type of evidence required. A genuine empirical manuscript must replace each sample quotation with a verbatim excerpt from the corresponding transcript and retain a theme only when supported across the dataset.

Theme 1: One Teacher, Many Learning Worlds Navigating Multiple Curricular Demands

The first theme captures the experience of continuously shifting between subjects requiring different knowledge, instructional approaches, materials, and assessment practices. Participants may describe multisubject teaching as intellectually demanding because preparation for one learning area cannot simply be transferred unchanged to another.

Participant 9 (P9):

"When I move from Mathematics to Filipino and then to Science, I also have to change how I teach. The children are the same, but the way I explain and the activities I use cannot always be the same."

Participant 2 (P2):

"The most challenging part is preparation. You are not preparing for only one subject. You have to think about the objectives, activities, materials, and assessment for several subjects."

Participant 7 (P7):

"Sometimes one lesson takes longer because the pupils need more explanation. Then I have to adjust the next subject without sacrificing what the children need to learn."

These accounts would indicate that multisubject teaching involves more than an increased quantity of lessons. It requires what may be described as pedagogical switching: teachers repeatedly reorganize their thinking according to the disciplinary and developmental demands of each learning area.

Pl's distinction between teaching Mathematics, Filipino, and Science is particularly significant. Effective multisubject teaching cannot be reduced to applying one generic teaching method across the curriculum.



Instead, teachers must recognize that disciplinary knowledge is represented and learned differently. P2's account further identifies planning as an important source of professional demand. This interpretation is consistent with Kis-ling (2026), who found that teachers managing multiple curricula experienced difficulties in lesson planning, assessment, classroom management, resources, and diverse learner needs. Fronda et al. (2026) likewise reported intensive lesson preparation and workload among teachers navigating diverse curricula and learners.

Iballa et al. (2025) further found that teachers responsible for multiple instructional demands experienced feelings of being overwhelmed. While multigrade teaching differs from the present phenomenon, the evidence reinforces the broader conclusion that navigating several curricular demands requires substantial organizational and pedagogical flexibility.

Thus, the theme suggests that multisubject competence is not simply **knowing many subjects**. It is the ability to move effectively among different forms of disciplinary knowledge while preserving coherence in children's overall learning experiences.

Theme 2: Teaching Through Culture and Context Making Learning Meaningful to Indigenous Learners

The second theme captures the potential role of children's culture, language, community practices, environment, and everyday experiences in teachers' instructional decisions.

Participant 2 (P2):

"When I use examples that the children see in the community, they understand faster. They can connect the lesson with something they already know."

Participant 4 (P4):

"In some lessons, I begin with their experiences at home or in the community. From there, we connect their experience to the concept in the lesson."

Participant 5 (P5):

"There are times when using the language familiar to the learners helps me explain a difficult idea. After they understand it, we connect it with the language required in the lesson."

P2's experience illustrates that familiarity can serve as an entry point for conceptual understanding. Rather than treating indigenous learners as entering school without relevant knowledge, the teacher recognizes that learners already possess culturally and environmentally situated experiences that can support formal learning.

P4's account would demonstrate a movement from experience toward abstraction: teachers begin with familiar community realities before connecting them to formal curricular concepts. This approach positions indigenous culture as a legitimate intellectual resource rather than merely supplementary classroom content.

The interpretation is particularly relevant to contemporary Indigenous Peoples Education in Ifugao. Bermudez and Babaran (2025) examined IPed implementation through pedagogy and methodology, IKSPs, curriculum and content, language of instruction, teacher training, materials, and assessment. The breadth of these dimensions demonstrates that culturally responsive indigenous education extends



beyond isolated cultural activities.

The potential use of familiar language described by P5 would likewise emphasize the role of linguistic accessibility in learning. However, such findings should be interpreted carefully. Using local knowledge and language does not mean reducing indigenous education to superficial cultural references. Rather, contextualization should respect the integrity and ownership of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices.

Theme 2 therefore positions culturally responsive multisubject teaching as a process of connecting curriculum, culture, community, and children's lived experiences.

Theme 3: Making More from What Is Available Resourcefulness as Adaptive Pedagogy

The third theme concerns teachers' responses when ideal instructional materials, technology, time, or other resources are unavailable.

Participant 1 (P1):

"We cannot always wait until we have the ideal material. I look around and think about what available materials can help the pupils understand the lesson."

Participant 3 (P3):

"Sometimes I prepare one material that can be used in different subjects. I modify it depending on the competency because it saves time and resources."

Participant 5 (P5):

"If one strategy does not work, I change it. What is important is that the learners understand, not that I follow my original plan exactly."

These responses would reveal adaptability as a central feature of teacher expertise. The teacher's work does not end when a lesson plan is prepared. Instead, effective pedagogy requires continuous assessment of whether the planned strategy works with actual learners under actual classroom conditions.

P1's account would illustrate material resourcefulness, whereas P3's response would demonstrate strategic integration across subjects. P5 captures perhaps the most important dimension: willingness to modify predetermined instruction in response to evidence of learner understanding.

This pattern is strongly consistent with recent Philippine research. Rondero and Casupanan (2024) found that teachers in far-flung schools responded to challenges through resourcefulness, innovation, resilience, understanding learner differences, and support systems.

Maloloy-on and Apas (2025) likewise identified creative and contextualized pedagogy, differentiated instructional strategies, and community involvement among the practices of multigrade teachers in geographically isolated schools. Durango and Ngilangil (2025) similarly found that demanding teaching conditions required flexibility and resourcefulness while also contributing to resilience and professional growth.

Evidence from Ifugao itself strengthens this interpretation. Dampilag (2026) studied 12 multigrade teachers across six elementary schools in Tinoc District, examining the challenges and coping strategies associated with instruction in a geographically relevant context.

Nevertheless, teacher resourcefulness should not be romanticized as a substitute for institutional support.



The ability to improvise demonstrates professional competence, but persistent shortages of instructional materials, training, or infrastructure remain systemic issues requiring policy responses.

Theme 4: Experience Becoming Expertise, Reflection, Adaptation, and the Master Teacher as Mentor

The final theme captures how accumulated teaching experiences may develop into professional wisdom and how master teachers may subsequently transfer that knowledge to colleagues.

Participant 2 (P2):

“When I was younger in teaching, I wanted everything to follow the lesson plan. Through experience, I learned that sometimes you have to change the plan because the learners are showing you what they need.”

Participant 4 (P4):

“Experience taught me to observe first before deciding what strategy to use. Not every class and not every learner responds in the same way.”

Participant 5 (P5):

“As a master teacher, I also share what I learned with other teachers. Sometimes they ask how I handle a lesson or a difficult learner, and we discuss possible strategies.”

These narratives would suggest that professional expertise develops through a continuing cycle of experience, observation, reflection, adaptation, and knowledge sharing.

P2 illustrates a shift from procedural fidelity toward professional judgment. This does not imply disregarding curriculum or planning; rather, experience enables teachers to recognize that plans are tools rather than inflexible scripts.

P4 demonstrates the increasing importance of observation. Experienced teachers may develop the ability to interpret learner responses before selecting an instructional intervention. P5 extends this expertise beyond the individual classroom by portraying the master teacher as a mentor and professional knowledge broker.

These interpretations resonate with Literal and Sabud (2025), whose phenomenological study found that multigrade teachers' experiences centered on multifaceted pedagogy and navigating complex learning environments.

Lisondra (2023) similarly identified flexibility, limited resources, inclusivity, meaningful learning, and an extraordinary sense of professional calling in the experiences of teachers in hinterland schools. Meanwhile, Durango and Ngilangil (2025) found that demanding multigrade teaching experiences could coexist with professional growth and fulfillment.

The theme therefore suggests that the significance of a master teacher lies not merely in seniority or formal position. Expertise becomes visible through context-sensitive professional judgment and the capacity to transform accumulated experience into support for other educators.

8. Synthesis of Findings

The four themes collectively construct multisubject teaching as an adaptive and culturally situated form of professional practice.

One Teacher, Many Learning Worlds captures the cognitive and pedagogical complexity of moving across disciplines. Teaching Through Culture and Context demonstrates how curriculum may become



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meaningful when connected with learners' language, community, and indigenous experiences. Making More from What Is Available illustrates teachers' resourcefulness and capacity to modify instruction according to classroom realities. Finally, Experience Becoming Expertise positions accumulated experience as a source of professional judgment, reflection, and mentorship.

The thematic relationship may be represented as:

Multiple Curricular Demands → Cultural and Learner Context → Pedagogical Adaptation → Reflective Experience → Professional Expertise

This interpretation is consistent with the wider Philippine evidence demonstrating that complex teaching environments require flexibility, differentiated instruction, contextualized pedagogy, resourcefulness, resilience, and professional collaboration (Fronza et al., 2026; Maloloy-on & Apas, 2025; Rondero & Casupanan, 2024).

The findings also challenge a deficit-oriented understanding of rural and indigenous education. Indigenous context should not be framed primarily as a problem teachers must overcome. Culture, language, local environmental knowledge, family experiences, and community relationships can constitute pedagogical resources when engaged ethically and appropriately.

At the same time, teachers' adaptability should not justify insufficient institutional support. Resourcefulness and resilience are valuable professional capacities, but they should complement adequate instructional materials, culturally responsive professional development, manageable workload, and organizational support rather than compensate indefinitely for their absence.

9. Implications

The study has implications for teacher development, curriculum implementation, and indigenous education. Professional development for multisubject teachers should move beyond generic teaching strategies and strengthen teachers' capacity for cross-disciplinary planning, differentiated instruction, contextualization, culturally responsive pedagogy, and formative assessment. Master teachers may be strategically positioned as mentors who facilitate professional learning communities, demonstration teaching, peer coaching, and collaborative lesson development.

For Indigenous Peoples Education, curriculum implementation should provide meaningful opportunities for legitimate and ethically appropriate local knowledge to inform instruction. This requires collaboration with indigenous communities rather than unilateral teacher decisions regarding what cultural knowledge may be used in classrooms.

At the institutional level, teachers in rural schools require sufficient instructional materials, continuing professional development, and administrative support. The documented capacity of teachers to adapt should be treated as a professional strength not as justification for maintaining inadequate educational resources.

10. Conclusion

Multisubject teaching in indigenous elementary education involves much more than teaching several



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subjects within a school day. It requires educators to navigate different disciplinary demands, interpret learner needs, connect formal curriculum with cultural and community contexts, maximize available resources, and continually adjust pedagogy according to evidence emerging from classroom experience.

The proposed themes portray master teachers as adaptive professionals whose expertise is simultaneously disciplinary, pedagogical, cultural, contextual, and reflective. Their accumulated classroom experiences may enable them not only to respond flexibly to learners but also to mentor other teachers and contribute to school-wide instructional improvement.

In the Ifugao context, effective multisubject teaching can therefore be understood as an ongoing negotiation among curriculum, learner, culture, community, resources, and professional judgment. Recognizing these relationships can contribute to more culturally responsive teacher development and stronger institutional support for educators serving indigenous communities.

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