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Navigating Multisubject Teaching: A Phenomenological Exploration of Pedagogical Challenges and Adaptive Practices Among Elementary School Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Multisubject teaching is a common feature of elementary education, particularly in schools where teachers are expected to handle several learning areas within the same grade level. Although this arrangement can promote holistic teaching and closer knowledge of learners, it may also generate substantial pedagogical, cognitive, and workload demands. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of elementary school teachers handling multiple subjects, with emphasis on their pedagogical challenges, adaptive practices, and perceptions of the positive and negative dimensions of multisubject teaching. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected elementary school teachers who taught several learning areas, including English, Mathematics, Science, Filipino, Araling Panlipunan, MAPEH, GMRC, and EPP. Thematic analysis revealed six major themes: (1) carrying the cognitive load of multiple disciplines, (2) time pressure and competing instructional demands, (3) versatility and professional growth through cross-disciplinary teaching, (4) adaptive planning and instructional flexibility, (5) emotional strain alongside professional fulfillment, and (6) collaboration and resourcefulness as mechanisms for sustaining practice. Findings indicate that multisubject teaching is experienced as both demanding and developmental. Teachers reported difficulties in maintaining subject-specific depth, preparing multiple lessons, assessing learners across disciplines, and balancing administrative responsibilities. Conversely, they perceived increased pedagogical flexibility, broader content knowledge, stronger learner relationships, and greater capacity for curriculum integration. The study highlights the need for targeted professional development, collaborative planning structures, accessible instructional resources, and workload-responsive school policies to sustain quality multisubject teaching.

Keywords: multisubject teaching, elementary teachers, phenomenology, pedagogical challenges, adaptive practices, teacher workload, interdisciplinary teaching

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1. Introduction

Elementary school teachers frequently work in instructional contexts that require them to teach multiple learning areas rather than specialize in a single discipline. In such arrangements, one teacher may be responsible for teaching language, mathematics, science, social studies, values education, arts, physical education, and practical subjects. This practice can support continuity of instruction and allow teachers to develop a holistic understanding of learners. However, it also places teachers in the demanding position of shifting repeatedly between different disciplinary concepts, pedagogical approaches, assessment expectations, and instructional materials.

Teaching is increasingly recognized as a complex profession involving far more than classroom instruction. Recent findings from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey show that teachers' work includes lesson preparation, marking, administrative tasks, communication with parents, professional learning, and other responsibilities. TALIS 2024 reported that teaching constituted about 43% of full-time teachers' self-reported working time across participating education systems, demonstrating that substantial portions of teachers' work are devoted to activities beyond direct instruction.

The demands can become especially pronounced when teachers prepare for several subjects. OECD data indicate that excessive lesson preparation, large numbers of lessons, marking, and administrative work remain notable sources of teacher stress. Around 35% of teachers across OECD systems identified excessive lesson preparation as a significant stressor, while about 40% reported excessive marking and approximately half reported administrative work as a source of substantial stress. These findings are relevant to multisubject teachers because each additional subject may require different objectives, pedagogical approaches, assessment tools, materials, and content preparation.

At the same time, multisubject teaching may foster professional adaptability. Elementary teachers who move between several disciplines may develop broader pedagogical repertoires and increased ability to integrate concepts across curriculum areas. For instance, a teacher may connect reading comprehension with science, mathematics with practical activities, or social studies with language learning. Such interdisciplinary opportunities can make learning more meaningful and contextualized.

Despite these potential benefits, the lived experiences of teachers handling numerous subjects deserve greater attention. Statistical measures of workload reveal the extent of teaching demands but may not fully capture how teachers interpret, negotiate, and adapt to those demands in everyday practice. A phenomenological approach is therefore useful because it centers teachers' experiences and explores how they make meaning of their work.

This study examined the pedagogical challenges and adaptive practices of elementary teachers handling multiple subjects. It sought to understand both the **positive and negative dimensions** of multisubject teaching and the strategies teachers use to maintain effective instruction despite competing demands.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1. How do elementary school teachers describe their lived experiences of teaching multiple subjects?
2. What pedagogical challenges do teachers experience in multisubject teaching?
3. What positive experiences and professional benefits do teachers associate with teaching multiple subjects?
4. What adaptive practices do teachers employ to manage the demands of multisubject instruction?

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5. What forms of institutional and professional support do teachers perceive as necessary for improving multisubject teaching?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 The Expanding Complexity of Teachers' Work

Teaching requires simultaneous engagement in instructional, administrative, emotional, and organizational responsibilities. Teachers prepare lessons, assess student work, manage classroom behavior, communicate with families, participate in professional development, and perform administrative duties. The OECD's TALIS 2024 findings demonstrate that workload is not merely determined by the number of teaching hours but also by the intensity and diversity of teachers' responsibilities.

Recent international evidence also suggests that greater time spent on marking, administrative duties, and communicating with parents is associated with lower teacher well-being. For multisubject teachers, these responsibilities may be compounded because instructional planning and assessment must be performed across several curriculum areas.

Multisubject teaching requires teachers to engage with different forms of disciplinary knowledge. Mathematics requires conceptual sequencing and problem-solving processes, while language instruction emphasizes literacy, communication, and comprehension. Science often involves inquiry and experimentation, whereas social studies integrates historical, cultural, geographical, and civic perspectives. MAPEH and practical subjects further require performance-based and experiential approaches.

Consequently, instructional transitions between subjects involve more than simply changing lesson topics; they require teachers to shift pedagogical orientations.

2.2 Teacher Workload and Lesson Preparation

Lesson planning is essential for effective teaching, but preparation becomes increasingly demanding when teachers handle many different subjects. TALIS 2024 indicates that teachers spend substantial time preparing lessons in addition to classroom instruction, with teachers reporting an average of approximately seven hours per week on lesson preparation across participating systems.

Earlier OECD analyses also recognized that workload may differ substantially depending on whether teachers are responsible for one grade or subject versus multiple grades and subjects. Multisubject teachers must identify competencies, prepare learning resources, design assessments, anticipate learner difficulties, and evaluate performance across several disciplines.

The resulting planning demands can produce time pressure. Teachers may struggle to achieve equal depth in each subject, especially where instructional resources are limited.

2.3 Adaptive Teaching and Pedagogical Flexibility

Adaptive teaching refers to teachers' capacity to adjust instruction in response to learner needs, classroom circumstances, curricular demands, and available resources. Teachers may modify explanations, activities, grouping strategies, assessment procedures, and learning materials when their original instructional plans do not adequately address students' needs.

Multisubject teachers may develop adaptive expertise through repeated exposure to varied content areas. Working across disciplines can encourage teachers to draw connections among subjects and repurpose strategies learned from one learning area in another.

However, pedagogical adaptation may also emerge out of necessity. When time, resources, and instructional materials are insufficient, teachers may rely on improvisation, peer collaboration, locally available materials, digital resources, and curriculum integration.

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of elementary school teachers engaged in multisubject teaching. Phenomenology was selected because the

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study aimed to understand how teachers personally experienced, interpreted, and gave meaning to teaching several subjects within their daily professional practice, with particular attention to the tensions, satisfactions, difficulties, and coping practices associated with multisubject instruction rather than simply determining the frequency of particular challenges. Participants were purposively selected elementary school teachers who were currently teaching at the elementary level, were responsible for at least four different learning areas, had at least one year of experience in multisubject teaching, and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. To protect confidentiality, participants were identified using codes such as P1, P2, P3, and succeeding participant numbers. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews that focused on teachers' experiences in handling several subjects, difficulties encountered in lesson preparation, learning areas they found more challenging, classroom management and assessment demands, positive experiences associated with multisubject teaching, instructional adaptations and coping strategies, professional learning experiences, and the forms of support they needed from schools and educational authorities. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to provide deeper explanations of significant experiences. The interview data were analyzed thematically through transcription and repeated reading of the responses, identification of significant statements, development of preliminary codes, clustering of related codes into categories, formation and refinement of themes, comparison of positive and negative experiences, and synthesis of the themes into an integrated description of multisubject teaching. Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, the analysis may also involve bracketing or epoché, horizontalization of significant statements, development of textural and structural descriptions, and synthesis of the essence of the participants' experiences. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer review of the themes, maintenance of an audit trail, use of rich participant descriptions, and researcher reflexivity to reduce the influence of personal assumptions on data interpretation. Ethical considerations were also observed throughout the study, with participation based on voluntary informed consent, participants being informed of their right to withdraw at any time, personal identifiers being removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms or participant codes being used in presenting quotations and findings.

4. Findings

Analysis generated six interconnected themes that illustrate both the difficulties and developmental opportunities associated with multisubject teaching.

Theme 1. Carrying the Cognitive Load of Multiple Disciplines

Teachers described multisubject teaching as a continual process of shifting between different disciplinary frameworks. The challenge was not merely remembering different topics but adjusting to the instructional expectations of each subject.

Negative Dimension: Difficulty Maintaining Equal Mastery Across Subjects

Participants described feeling more confident in subjects aligned with their specialization and less secure when teaching areas outside their strongest academic background.

Participant Response – P2:"There are subjects where I can explain the lesson immediately, but are also subjects where I need to study first before I teach. I do not want to give the children wrong information."

This response reflects a concern with subject-matter accuracy. Teachers may experience additional preparation burdens when encountering lessons requiring content knowledge that they do not routinely use.

Participant Response – P5: "The difficult part is changing from Math to Filipino, then later Science and MAPEH. The approach is different, so my mind has to adjust every time."

The statement illustrates cognitive switching. Teachers must transition from computational instruction to literacy development, scientific inquiry, performance tasks, or values-based discussion within the same workday.

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Positive Dimension: Development of Broad Professional Knowledge

Despite the difficulty, participants also perceived multisubject teaching as contributing to professional development.

Participant Response – P1:

"Before, I was more comfortable teaching language, but because I had to teach all subjects, I became more confident in Science and Math. I learned together with my pupils."

This experience suggests that multisubject teaching can broaden teachers' professional knowledge and increase instructional confidence over time.

The theme reveals a tension between disciplinary breadth and disciplinary depth. Multisubject teachers acquire broad curricular knowledge but may experience uncertainty when required to master several specialized content areas simultaneously.

Theme 2. Time Pressure and Competing Instructional Demands

Participants consistently identified time as one of the greatest difficulties associated with multisubject teaching.

Negative Dimension: Lesson Preparation Becomes an Extended Workday

Teachers described preparing several lessons, activities, and assessments, often beyond official working hours.

Participant Response – P3: "When I finish teaching, the work is still not finished. I still have to prepare the next lessons, check papers, and make activities for different subjects."

Participant Response – P6: "Sometimes I prepare at night because during school hours there is not enough time. Every subject has a different competency and activity."

These responses mirror wider evidence that teacher workload includes substantial time spent outside direct instruction. TALIS 2024 identifies lesson preparation, marking, and administrative duties as significant components of teachers' workload and stress.

Another difficulty was prioritization.

Participant Response – P4:

"I want every subject to have a good activity, but sometimes there is not enough time to prepare everything. You have to choose where to spend more time."

This statement reflects a potential instructional trade-off: teachers may provide greater preparation to subjects perceived as difficult or academically prioritized while simplifying activities in other learning areas.

Positive Dimension: Improved Organization and Time Management

Several participants nevertheless indicated that multisubject teaching strengthened their ability to organize their work.

Participant Response – P7:"I learned to plan my whole week instead of preparing one lesson at a time. When everything is organized, teaching becomes easier."

Interpretation

Time pressure represents one of the most persistent negative dimensions of multisubject teaching. However, prolonged exposure to these demands appears to encourage teachers to develop planning routines, prioritization strategies, and more efficient use of instructional time.

Theme 3. Versatility and Professional Growth Through Cross-Disciplinary Teaching

Participants described multisubject teaching as an opportunity to become more flexible and professionally versatile.

Positive Dimension: Connecting Concepts Across Learning Areas

Teachers found that teaching several subjects allowed them to identify connections between lessons.

Participant Response – P2: "Sometimes the topic in Science can also be used in English reading. Instead

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of making separate examples, I connect them so pupils understand both lessons."
Another participant explained:
"When we discuss the environment in Science, I can connect it with responsibility in GMRC and community issues in Araling Panlipunan." — **P5**
These responses illustrate interdisciplinary teaching, where concepts are intentionally linked across curriculum areas.

Positive Dimension: Deeper Understanding of Learners

Because teachers spend considerable instructional time with the same learners across different subjects, they are able to observe multiple dimensions of student ability.

Participant Response – P8: "A child who is weak in Math may be very good in MAPEH or Filipino. Because I teach them in different subjects, I can see their strengths."

Negative Dimension: Risk of Surface-Level Coverage

Breadth may occasionally come at the cost of deeper instruction.

Participant Response – P3: "There are times when I feel I could teach the lesson better if I had more time to study that subject. Sometimes we focus on finishing the competencies."

Multisubject teaching enhances teachers' understanding of the whole learner and provides opportunities for curricular integration. However, teachers may experience tension between covering multiple curriculum requirements and providing deep, specialized instruction.

Theme 4. Adaptive Planning and Instructional Flexibility

A major theme emerging from participants' experiences was their ability to modify teaching practices in response to practical constraints.

Positive Dimension: Resourcefulness in Instruction

Teachers described using locally available materials, digital resources, peer-shared materials, and improvised activities.

Participant Response – P1: "If there are no ready materials, I make my own. Sometimes I use objects in the classroom or things pupils can find at home."

Participant Response – P4: "I search for examples, videos, and activities, but I still change them because they have to fit the level of my pupils."

This adaptation demonstrates that teachers do not merely adopt resources; they contextualize them based on learners' abilities and classroom circumstances.

Positive Dimension: Flexible Pedagogical Decision-Making

Participants also modified their teaching strategies when learners encountered difficulty.

Participant Response – P6: "If my first explanation does not work, I change it. In Math I might use objects, while in Filipino I use examples from their daily life."

Negative Dimension: Adaptation as a Response to Insufficient Resources

Although creativity was viewed positively, participants indicated that improvisation sometimes occurred because of resource shortages.

Participant Response – P7:

"Being resourceful is good, but sometimes you become resourceful because you have no other choice. You spend your own time making materials."

Adaptive practice is simultaneously a professional strength and a response to structural limitations. Teachers demonstrate creativity, but continuous reliance on personal improvisation may place additional demands on time and energy.

Theme 5. Emotional Strain Alongside Professional Fulfillment

Multisubject teaching produced contrasting emotional experiences.

Negative Dimension: Fatigue, Pressure, and Feelings of Inadequacy

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Teachers described exhaustion after handling several subjects and completing related assessment and documentation.
Participant Response – P3: "There are days when you are already tired but you still need to prepare for another subject. Sometimes you ask yourself if you gave enough to every lesson."
The statement demonstrates not only physical fatigue but also professional self-evaluation.
Participant Response – P5: "The pressure comes when you want to teach everything well. You know the learners depend on you in all subjects."
This aligns with evidence that teacher well-being may decline as time spent on marking, administrative tasks, and other demanding responsibilities increases.
Positive Dimension: Fulfillment Through Learner Progress
Participants nevertheless reported significant satisfaction when students demonstrated improvement.
Participant Response – P1:
"It is tiring, but when you see that they learned something from you in different subjects, you feel proud."
Another participant stated:
"I enjoy seeing that the children trust me because I am with them in almost all their lessons." - **P8**
Teachers' emotional experiences were characterized by a duality of strain and fulfillment. The same responsibilities that produced exhaustion also strengthened relationships with learners and created feelings of professional accomplishment.

Theme 6. Collaboration and Resourcefulness as Mechanisms for Sustaining Practice
Participants emphasized that multisubject teaching becomes more manageable when teachers collaborate.
Positive Dimension: Peer Support and Sharing of Expertise
Participants sought assistance from colleagues who were stronger in particular subjects.
Participant Response – P4: "If I am unsure about a Math lesson, I ask a colleague who is strong in Math. In return, I can help them with English activities."
Participants also exchanged lesson plans and materials.
Participant Response – P6: "Sharing materials saves time. We do not have to make everything from the beginning."
Negative Dimension: Unequal Access to Professional Support
Not all participants experienced consistent opportunities for collaboration.
Participant Response – P7: "Sometimes everyone is busy with their own classes, so even if you want to ask for help, there is no time."

Collaboration serves as an important professional resource. However, informal cooperation cannot fully compensate for a lack of structured planning time and institutional support.

5. Summary of Themes

Theme	Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
1. Cognitive Load Across Disciplines	Broader content knowledge and increased teaching confidence	Difficulty maintaining equal mastery across subjects
2. Time Pressure and Competing Demands	Better organization and time management	Heavy lesson preparation, checking, and work beyond school hours
3. Cross-Disciplinary Professional Growth	Curriculum integration and better understanding of learner strengths	Risk of shallow coverage due to many competencies
4. Adaptive Planning and Flexibility	Creativity, contextualization, flexible teaching strategies	Adaptation sometimes driven by lack of resources

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Theme	Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
5. Emotional Strain and Fulfillment	Satisfaction, stronger learner relationships, professional pride	Fatigue, stress, and concern about instructional quality
6. Collaboration and Resourcefulness	Shared expertise, materials, and peer learning	Limited collaboration time and unequal support

6. Discussion

The findings reveal that multisubject teaching is neither exclusively burdensome nor uniformly beneficial. Instead, teachers experience it as a multidimensional professional condition involving **continuous negotiation between workload, competence, adaptability, and commitment to learners**.

The first major concern relates to cognitive and pedagogical demands. Participants described difficulty moving between subjects requiring different forms of expertise. This reinforces the idea that teacher workload cannot be understood solely in terms of classroom hours. The number and diversity of subjects influence preparation complexity. OECD discussions of teacher workload have similarly recognized that teachers responsible for several grades or subjects may face different workload demands from those assigned to a single teaching area.

The second theme emphasizes lesson preparation and time pressure. Participants' descriptions of evening preparation, multiple assessment tasks, and competing instructional priorities are consistent with current international findings that lesson preparation and marking contribute substantially to workload-related stress. TALIS 2024 reported that approximately 35% of teachers identified excessive lesson preparation as a substantial source of stress and about 40% identified excessive marking.

However, multisubject teaching also promoted professional development. Participants described increased confidence, broader content knowledge, and the ability to integrate concepts across learning areas. These findings suggest that multisubject teaching may contribute to the development of adaptive expertise when teachers are given sufficient time, resources, and professional support.

Curriculum integration emerged as one of the strongest benefits. Teachers who handle several learning areas can identify conceptual overlaps and design interconnected learning experiences. Such integration can reduce fragmentation and enable students to encounter ideas in meaningful contexts.

The findings further indicate that resourcefulness should not be interpreted only as an individual teacher characteristic. Participants often became creative because instructional resources were insufficient. While teacher ingenuity is commendable, an educational system should not rely exclusively on teachers' personal time and resources to compensate for systemic shortages.

The emotional dimension of multisubject teaching also deserves attention. Participants experienced tiredness and pressure but simultaneously described pride, fulfillment, and stronger connections with learners. These apparently contradictory experiences reflect the complexity of teaching: demanding working conditions can coexist with strong professional commitment.

Finally, collaboration emerged as a protective mechanism. Teachers benefited from exchanging materials, consulting colleagues, and sharing disciplinary expertise. Creating institutionalized collaborative planning structures could therefore reduce individual workload while improving instructional quality.

7. Essence of the Phenomenon

The essence of multisubject teaching may be described as **a continuous act of pedagogical navigation**. Teachers move daily across disciplines, learner needs, limited time, instructional expectations, and professional responsibilities. They experience the role as demanding because it requires constant preparation and cognitive adjustment, yet they also experience it as professionally enriching because it develops versatility, resourcefulness, and a holistic understanding of learners.

Multisubject teachers do not merely "teach many subjects." They continuously reconstruct their

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professional identity as language teachers, mathematics teachers, science teachers, social studies teachers, values educators, and facilitators of creative and physical development—sometimes within a single school day.
Their experience is therefore characterized by a central paradox:
Multisubject teaching expands teachers' professional capacities while simultaneously expanding the demands placed upon them.

8. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that elementary school teachers experience multisubject teaching as a combination of challenge, adaptation, and professional growth. Teaching several learning areas creates significant demands in terms of lesson preparation, subject-matter mastery, assessment, time management, and emotional energy.
At the same time, multisubject teaching provides opportunities for teachers to develop broad pedagogical knowledge, interdisciplinary thinking, instructional creativity, and stronger understanding of learners.
Six major themes characterized the experience: cognitive load across disciplines; time pressure and competing demands; professional versatility through cross-disciplinary teaching; adaptive planning and instructional flexibility; emotional strain alongside fulfillment; and collaboration as a mechanism for sustaining practice.
The findings suggest that the effectiveness of multisubject teaching should not depend solely on teachers' individual resourcefulness. Institutional structures must support teachers through relevant professional development, adequate instructional resources, manageable workload arrangements, and opportunities for collaborative planning.

9. Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, schools and educational leaders may consider the following actions:

1. **Provide subject-specific professional development.**

   Teachers handling multiple subjects should receive targeted training particularly in learning areas outside their specialization.
2. **Establish regular collaborative planning periods.**

   Teachers should have protected time to exchange lesson plans, instructional materials, and assessment strategies.
3. **Develop centralized banks of contextualized teaching resources.**

   Accessible materials can reduce the amount of time teachers spend creating resources independently.
4. **Promote interdisciplinary curriculum planning.**

   Teachers may be encouraged to integrate related competencies across subjects when educationally appropriate.
5. **Review teacher workload.**

   School administrators should consider not only teaching hours but also the number of subjects, preparation demands, assessment requirements, and administrative responsibilities assigned to each teacher.
6. **Strengthen teacher well-being programs.**

   Mechanisms for reducing unnecessary paperwork, providing mentoring, and recognizing

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workload pressures may support teacher sustainability.

10. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may compare multisubject teachers across rural and urban schools, grade levels, school sizes, or years of teaching experience. Researchers may also examine differences between teachers whose academic specialization aligns with the subjects they teach and those working outside their original specialization.

Mixed-methods research could measure relationships among number of subjects taught, workload, self-efficacy, instructional quality, and teacher well-being. Longitudinal studies could further determine how teachers' adaptive strategies develop over time.

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The 2025 TALIS report is especially relevant because it documents the continuing importance of workload, lesson preparation, marking, administrative duties, learner diversity, and teacher self-efficacy in shaping teachers' professional experiences.

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