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# TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN MULTISUBJECT TEACHING: MANAGING INTEGRATED INSTRUCTION ACROSS CORE LEARNING AREAS IN A GRADE 4 CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

*Multisubject teaching is a defining feature of elementary education, particularly in contexts where a single teacher is responsible for delivering instruction across several core learning areas. Although integrated instruction is widely promoted as an approach for improving instructional coherence and enhancing learner engagement, the practical realities of managing multisubject teaching in everyday classroom settings remain insufficiently examined, especially from the perspective of teachers. This qualitative study explored the experiences of Grade 4 teachers in managing integrated instruction across core learning areas within an elementary classroom context. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed key patterns related to navigating curriculum density and time constraints, employing strategic integration of content and skills across subjects, adapting pedagogical practices to address learner diversity, and managing the emotional and professional demands associated with multisubject teaching. The findings suggest that while integrated instruction contributes to greater instructional coherence and learner engagement, it also entails substantial cognitive and emotional demands for teachers. These results highlight the importance of strengthened institutional support, clearer curriculum alignment, and sustained professional development to support and sustain effective multisubject teaching practices in elementary education.*

**Keywords:** multisubject teaching, integrated instruction, elementary education, qualitative study, teacher experiences

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Elementary education places unique instructional demands on teachers, particularly in systems where a single teacher is tasked with delivering instruction across multiple core learning areas. Multisubject teaching where one teacher handles subjects such as language, mathematics, science, social studies, and values education has long been a structural feature of elementary schooling. This arrangement is often justified on developmental grounds, as young learners benefit from continuity, familiarity, and coherence in instruction. However, the increasing complexity of curricula and accountability demands has intensified the challenges associated with multisubject teaching.

Integrated instruction has been promoted as a pedagogical response to these challenges. By connecting concepts, skills, and themes across subject areas, integrated instruction aims to reduce curricular fragmentation and promote meaningful learning. Research suggests that integration can enhance learner engagement, transfer of knowledge, and holistic understanding. Yet, while the theoretical benefits of integration are well documented, less attention has been given to how teachers experience, negotiate, and sustain integrated instruction within the realities of multisubject teaching.

In Grade 4, curricular expectations increase significantly as learners transition from early foundational skills to more content-heavy learning areas. Teachers must balance subject-specific competencies, assessment requirements, and learner diversity while managing limited instructional time. Understanding teachers' lived experiences in this context is critical for informing curriculum design, professional development, and policy support.

This study explored the experiences of Grade 4 teachers in managing integrated instruction across core learning areas, focusing on how they plan, implement, and reflect on multisubject teaching. By foregrounding teachers' voices, the study aimed to provide empirical insights into the pedagogical, emotional, and professional dimensions of integrated instruction in elementary classrooms.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Multisubject Teaching in Elementary Education

Multisubject teaching is a common instructional arrangement in elementary schools worldwide, where a single teacher is responsible for teaching multiple core learning areas to the same group of learners. Research suggests that this model supports strong learner–teacher relationships and instructional continuity, which are particularly beneficial for younger learners who thrive on consistency and familiarity (Beane, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2017). However, empirical studies also indicate that multisubject teaching significantly increases teachers' workload and cognitive demands, as teachers are required to plan, teach, assess, and reflect across several disciplines simultaneously (Kelchtermans, 2005; Day & Gu, 2010). Without adequate institutional and professional support, this arrangement may result in instructional overload, surface-level coverage of content, and diminished instructional quality, especially in upper elementary grades where curriculum complexity intensifies (Hargreaves, 1998).

### 2.2 Integrated Instruction and Curriculum Coherence

Integrated instruction involves the deliberate connection of content, skills, and concepts across subject boundaries to promote coherence and meaningful learning experiences. Scholars argue that integration



enables learners to recognize relationships among ideas and apply knowledge in authentic and contextualized ways, thereby supporting deeper understanding and transfer of learning (Jacobs, 1989; Fogarty, 1991). Interdisciplinary and thematic instructional approaches have been associated with improved learner motivation, engagement, and retention of knowledge, particularly in elementary education settings (Drake & Reid, 2018). However, research also emphasizes that effective integration requires careful instructional planning, strong curricular alignment, and sufficient teacher expertise. In rigid curriculum structures that emphasize subject-specific competencies and pacing guides, teachers may find it challenging to implement integration in a sustained and systematic manner (Beane, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 2017).

### **2.3 Teachers' Experiences and Pedagogical Decision-Making**

Teachers' instructional practices are shaped by an interplay of personal beliefs, professional experiences, contextual constraints, and emotional demands. Qualitative research consistently shows that teachers engage in ongoing pedagogical decision-making as they negotiate curriculum expectations, learner needs, and classroom realities (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). In multisubject teaching contexts, teachers frequently rely on adaptive strategies, improvisation, and professional judgment to manage competing instructional demands across learning areas (Kelchtermans, 2005). These experiences highlight the importance of understanding teaching not merely as a technical or procedural activity, but as a relational and emotional practice that involves care, moral responsibility, and sustained emotional engagement with learners (Hargreaves, 1998; Day & Gu, 2010).

### **2.4 Gaps in Existing Literature**

While existing research has documented the pedagogical benefits of integrated instruction and

curriculum coherence, fewer studies have examined how teachers experience the implementation of integration within multisubject teaching contexts. In particular, there remains limited qualitative research exploring how elementary teachers simultaneously manage curriculum density, instructional integration, learner diversity, and emotional demands in real classroom settings. Much of the existing literature focuses on curriculum models or learner outcomes, with less attention given to teachers' lived experiences and adaptive practices (Drake & Reid, 2018). This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of teachers' experiences in managing integrated instruction across multiple learning areas in a Grade 4 classroom, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of multisubject teaching in elementary education.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design, appropriate for exploring complex instructional practices within a bounded classroom context. The design allowed for an in-depth examination of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and strategies related to multisubject teaching and integrated instruction.

### **3.2 Participants and Research Site**

Participants included Grade 4 teachers who were responsible for teaching multiple core learning areas in an elementary school. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their direct involvement in multisubject teaching. The research site was selected to represent a typical elementary school context where integrated instruction is encouraged but not formally mandated.

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using three qualitative methods:



1. **Semi-structured interviews** explored teachers' experiences, challenges, and instructional strategies in multisubject teaching.
2. **Classroom observations** focused on instructional integration, transitions between subjects, learner engagement, and teaching routines.
3. **Document analysis** included lesson plans, instructional guides, and assessment tools to triangulate reported practices.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **thematic analysis** following an inductive approach. Transcripts and observation notes were coded, categorized, and refined into themes through iterative analysis. Credibility was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing.

### 4. Results

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and instructional documents generated four major themes that collectively describe teachers' experiences in managing multisubject teaching and integrated instruction in a Grade 4 classroom. These themes capture the instructional, contextual, and emotional dimensions of multisubject teaching, revealing how teachers navigate curriculum demands, adapt pedagogical practices, and sustain professional commitment in an integrated teaching environment.

#### Theme 1: Navigating Curriculum Density and Time Constraints

Curriculum density and limited instructional time emerged as a pervasive challenge in multisubject teaching. Teachers consistently described the difficulty of balancing extensive curricular requirements across

multiple learning areas within a fixed daily schedule. Participants explained that the volume of competencies to be covered often exceeded the available instructional time, resulting in a sense of constant urgency and instructional pressure. One teacher reflected, "*Minsan pakiramdam ko naghahabol lang ako ng lesson. Kailangan kong tapusin lahat pero kulang talaga ang oras,*" illustrating how curriculum expectations shape daily teaching practices.

Additional participants echoed similar concerns, noting that instructional pacing was frequently dictated by the need to complete mandated content rather than by learners' mastery of concepts. Another teacher shared, "*May mga lesson na alam mong kailangan pang ulitin, pero hindi na puwede dahil may susunod pang subject,*" while a third added, "*Parang hati-hati ang oras mo sa lahat ng subject, kaya minsan mababaw ang discussion.*" These accounts highlight how curriculum density forces teachers to make difficult decisions about which concepts to emphasize, revisit, or condense.

Interpretatively, this theme underscores the structural constraints of multisubject teaching in elementary education. The findings align with research suggesting that overloaded curricula can limit opportunities for deep learning and increase teacher stress (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Drake and Reid (2018) further note that without deliberate curriculum alignment, teachers are often compelled to prioritize coverage over understanding, a tension clearly reflected in participants' experiences. In this study, curriculum density shaped not only instructional pacing but also teachers' perceptions of instructional effectiveness.

#### Theme 2: Strategic Integration across Learning Areas

In response to curriculum and time pressures, teachers described strategic integration of learning areas as a key instructional approach. Rather than treating subjects as isolated units, teachers intentionally connected content



and skills across disciplines to streamline instruction and enhance coherence. Integration commonly occurred through thematic planning, where reading and writing tasks were embedded within science and social studies lessons, and mathematics was contextualized through real-life applications linked to other subjects.

One participant explained, “*Kapag may topic sa Araling Panlipunan, doon ko na rin pinapasok ang reading at writing activities para hindi hiwalay ang lessons.*” Another teacher noted, “*Mas madali para sa mga bata kapag magkakaugnay ang lessons, hindi sila nalilito kung iba-iba ang subject,*” while a third shared, “*Integration ang paraan ko para hindi paulit-ulit ang preparation sa bawat subject.*”

Teachers viewed integration not only as an instructional strategy that benefits learners but also as a practical response to multisubject teaching demands. This dual function highlights integration as both a pedagogical and managerial tool. The findings support literature suggesting that integrated instruction promotes curriculum coherence, learner engagement, and transfer of learning when thoughtfully implemented (Drake & Reid, 2018). However, participants also indicated that integration was often teacher-initiated rather than systemically guided, pointing to the need for institutional frameworks that formally support integrated curriculum design.

### **Theme 3: Adaptive Pedagogical Practices for Diverse Learners**

Learner diversity emerged as a central factor influencing instructional decision-making across subjects. Teachers described wide variations in learners’ academic abilities, learning pace, language proficiency, and motivation, which required constant adaptation of teaching strategies. Participants emphasized that multisubject teaching amplified these challenges, as differentiation had to be applied across several learning areas simultaneously.

One teacher stated, “*Hindi pare-pareho ang level ng bata, kaya kailangan talagang mag-adjust sa bawat subject.*” Another shared, “*May mabilis makaintindi, may kailangan pang ulit-ulitin, kaya kailangan ng iba’t ibang paraan ng pagtuturo,*” while a third explained, “*Minsan pinapasabay ko ang group work at seatwork para ma-accommodate lahat.*”

Teachers reported using flexible grouping, modified activities, and simplified explanations to ensure learner participation. Classroom observations confirmed these practices, revealing instances of peer support, scaffolded tasks, and adjusted pacing. Interpretively, this theme highlights teacher adaptability as a critical component of effective multisubject teaching. Tomlinson (2014) emphasizes that responsive and differentiated instruction is essential for addressing learner diversity, particularly in elementary classrooms. In this study, adaptability enabled teachers to sustain integrated instruction despite varied learner needs, reinforcing the role of professional judgment and pedagogical flexibility.

### **Theme 4: Emotional and Professional Demands of Multisubject Teaching**

Beyond instructional challenges, teachers emphasized the **emotional and professional demands** of multisubject teaching. Participants openly discussed experiences of fatigue, stress, and self-doubt associated with planning, teaching, and assessing multiple subjects daily. One teacher shared, “*Nakakapagod talaga lalo na kapag sabay-sabay ang requirements,*” while another reflected, “*May pagkakataon na nagtatanong ka sa sarili mo kung tama ba ang ginagawa mo.*”

Despite these challenges, teachers expressed a strong sense of commitment and fulfillment derived from learner progress. As one participant stated, “*Nakakapagod pero masaya rin kapag nakikita mong may natututunan ang mga bata.*” Another added, “*Kahit mahirap, tuloy pa rin kasi responsibilidad natin*



*ang mga bata.*” These responses illustrate the emotional complexity of multisubject teaching, where stress and fulfillment coexist.

This theme aligns with Hargreaves’ (1998) concept of teaching as emotional labor, emphasizing that teachers’ work involves significant emotional investment alongside technical competence. The findings suggest that while multisubject teaching places considerable emotional demands on teachers, their intrinsic motivation and professional identity play a crucial role in sustaining instructional practice. However, the emotional toll identified in this study highlights the need for institutional recognition and support to promote teacher well-being and instructional sustainability.

### Summary of Themes

Collectively, the four themes illustrate that multisubject teaching in Grade 4 is a dynamic and multifaceted practice shaped by curriculum structures, instructional strategies, learner diversity, and emotional labor. Teachers demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and professional commitment in managing integrated instruction, yet their experiences also reveal systemic challenges that warrant institutional and policy-level attention. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of multisubject teaching and underscore the importance of supporting teachers in sustaining effective and integrated instructional practices.

### 5. Discussion

The findings illustrate that multisubject teaching in Grade 4 is a complex, layered, and demanding instructional practice that requires teachers to engage in continuous pedagogical negotiation. Managing multiple learning areas within a single classroom obliges teachers to balance subject-specific competencies, assessment requirements, and learner needs, often within rigid schedules and dense curricular frameworks. Curriculum density and limited instructional time emerged as persistent structural challenges, echoing

extensive literature on teacher workload and instructional overload in elementary education. Studies have shown that when teachers are responsible for multiple subjects, they experience heightened cognitive demands related to planning, pacing, and content alignment, which can constrain opportunities for deep learning and reflective practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kelchtermans, 2005). Such conditions frequently compel teachers to prioritize curriculum coverage over mastery, reinforcing surface-level instruction rather than sustained conceptual understanding.

In response to these constraints, teachers’ use of integrated instruction reflects deliberate efforts to create coherence across learning areas while managing competing instructional demands. Rather than viewing subjects as discrete silos, teachers strategically linked content, skills, and themes to streamline instruction and maximize limited time. This finding supports research suggesting that integration can reduce curricular fragmentation and promote meaningful connections among disciplines, thereby enhancing both instructional efficiency and learner engagement (Drake & Reid, 2018; Beane, 1997). Integrated instruction allows teachers to address multiple competencies simultaneously, which is particularly advantageous in multisubject contexts where instructional time is scarce. When thoughtfully planned, integration has been associated with increased learner motivation, improved transfer of learning, and more authentic learning experiences (Fogarty, 1991; Jacobs, 1989).

Importantly, the study reveals that integration functioned not only as a pedagogical approach but also as an adaptive coping strategy for teachers managing multisubject responsibilities. Teachers employed integration to manage workload, reduce repetitive planning, and maintain instructional flow across subjects. This adaptive use of integration aligns with literature on teacher agency, which emphasizes that teachers actively construct instructional responses to



contextual constraints rather than merely implementing prescribed curricula (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). In multisubject teaching environments, such agency becomes essential for sustaining instructional quality and professional efficacy amid structural limitations.

However, beyond instructional and cognitive demands, the findings draw attention to the emotional dimensions of multisubject teaching, which are often underrepresented in discussions of curriculum and pedagogy. Teachers reported experiences of fatigue, stress, and self-doubt alongside feelings of fulfillment and professional commitment. This duality underscores the emotional complexity of teaching and reinforces the conceptualization of teaching as both cognitive and emotional labor. Hargreaves (1998) argues that teaching is inherently emotional work, involving sustained emotional investment, care, and moral responsibility for learners. Similarly, Day and Gu (2010) highlight that teachers' emotional resilience is closely tied to their capacity to manage workload, maintain motivation, and sustain effective practice over time.

The emotional demands identified in this study suggest that multisubject teaching intensifies not only instructional responsibilities but also affective strain, particularly when institutional support is limited. Without recognition of these emotional and cognitive demands, teachers risk burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished instructional effectiveness (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Consequently, the findings reinforce the need to view multisubject teaching holistically—as a practice that involves instructional expertise, adaptive problem-solving, and emotional engagement. Supporting teachers in multisubject contexts therefore requires not only pedagogical guidance on integration but also systemic measures that address workload, emotional well-being, and professional sustainability.

## 6. Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of the study point to several important needs that must be addressed to sustain effective multisubject teaching and integrated instruction in elementary education. Foremost among these is the need for curriculum alignment that explicitly supports integration across learning areas. When curriculum guides and learning competencies are coherently aligned, teachers are better able to design lessons that connect concepts and skills across subjects in meaningful ways, rather than treating integration as an individual initiative. Clear curricular frameworks that highlight shared themes, competencies, and performance standards can reduce fragmentation and support instructional coherence, particularly in multisubject teaching contexts.

The study also underscores the importance of professional development programs that focus on integrated lesson planning and multisubject pedagogy. Teachers require sustained and practical training that equips them with strategies for designing interdisciplinary lessons, managing time across multiple subjects, and assessing integrated learning outcomes. Such professional development should move beyond one-time workshops and instead provide continuous support through mentoring, collaborative planning, and professional learning communities. Strengthening teachers' pedagogical capacity in this area can enhance instructional confidence and reduce the cognitive load associated with planning for multiple learning areas.

Equally important is the institutional recognition of the emotional and cognitive demands of multisubject teaching. The study highlights that managing multiple subjects involves not only technical instructional challenges but also significant emotional labor, including stress, fatigue, and sustained responsibility for learners' academic and personal development. Schools and education leaders should acknowledge these demands by fostering supportive work environments, promoting collegial collaboration, and providing access



to psychosocial support mechanisms. Recognizing teachers' emotional well-being as integral to instructional quality is essential for sustaining effective teaching practices.

Finally, the findings emphasize the need for a reduction in non-instructional workload to allow teachers to focus more fully on lesson planning, instructional reflection, and learner support. Administrative tasks and additional responsibilities often compete with instructional time, limiting opportunities for thoughtful planning and professional growth. Streamlining non-teaching duties and protecting time for instructional preparation can enable teachers to engage more deeply in reflective practice, thereby enhancing the quality of integrated instruction and improving learning outcomes in multisubject teaching environments.

## 7. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that teachers' experiences in multisubject teaching are shaped by a dynamic interplay of curriculum demands, instructional integration, learner diversity, and emotional labor, all of which collectively influence how teaching is planned, enacted, and sustained in elementary classrooms. The findings reveal that multisubject teaching extends beyond the technical delivery of content; it requires teachers to continuously negotiate between extensive curricular expectations, limited instructional time, and the diverse academic and developmental needs of learners. These conditions compel teachers to exercise high levels of professional judgment and flexibility, particularly in Grade 4 where curricular content becomes more demanding and learner differences become more pronounced.

Integrated instruction emerged as a central pedagogical response to these challenges, offering teachers a means to create coherence across learning areas and maintain learner engagement. By linking concepts, skills, and themes across subjects, teachers were able to reduce

curricular fragmentation and make learning more meaningful for learners. However, the study also highlights that the effectiveness of integrated instruction depends largely on teachers' adaptive expertise their ability to make informed instructional decisions, adjust strategies in response to learner needs, and manage competing demands in real time. Without adequate preparation and support, integration risks becoming superficial or unsustainable, particularly in contexts characterized by high workload and limited resources.

Equally significant is the emotional dimension of multisubject teaching revealed in the study. Teachers' narratives underscored the emotional labor involved in managing multiple subjects, including experiences of fatigue, stress, and self-doubt, alongside strong feelings of responsibility and fulfillment. These emotional demands directly affect teachers' capacity to sustain effective practice and maintain instructional quality over time. As such, recognizing teaching as both cognitive and emotional work is essential in understanding multisubject teaching as a holistic professional practice rather than a purely instructional task.

Ultimately, the study underscores the critical role of institutional support in sustaining effective multisubject teaching. Supportive school structures, aligned curricula, targeted professional development, and reduced non-instructional workload are necessary to enable teachers to implement integrated instruction meaningfully and sustainably. Recognizing and valuing teachers' lived experiences both their instructional expertise and emotional investments is essential not only for improving instructional quality but also for promoting teacher well-being and long-term professional commitment. By addressing these interconnected factors, elementary education systems can better support multisubject teaching and enhance learning experiences for both teachers and learners.

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