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BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS OF MULTIGRADE LEARNERS WITH READING DIFFICULTIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the behavioral problems of multigrade learners with reading difficulties and the associated management experiences of their teachers in the Division of Ozamiz City for the School Year 2025-2026. It was conducted across three public elementary schools—Guimad ES, Mintalar ES, and Dalapang ES wherein the study involved 11 multigrade teacher participants. Through thematic analysis of interview data, the findings revealed a cascading cycle where academic reading struggles trigger profound emotional distress (shame, fear, frustration) in learners, which manifests as distinct behavioral problems including withdrawal, avoidance, outbursts, and strategic absenteeism. Teachers reported significant challenges in managing these behaviors, primarily due to the difficulty of balancing attention, severe time constraints, overwhelming workloads, resource limitations, and the resulting emotional strain. In response, teachers employ a multifaceted suite of coping mechanisms, including instructional adaptations, individualized support, collaborative peer-assisted learning, positive motivational techniques, structured classroom management, and attempts at home-school collaboration. The study concludes that addressing these intertwined academic-behavioral issues requires moving beyond individual teacher effort to implement systemic support.

Keywords: *behavioral problems, coping mechanisms, multigrade learners, phenomenological study, reading difficulties, teacher challenges*

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Introduction

Multigrade teaching, where one teacher educates students from multiple grade levels in a single classroom, is crucial in the Philippines for providing inclusive, accessible education, particularly in remote areas. Guided by DepEd Order No. 021, s. 2023, this approach standardizes classroom organization and instructional support within the K to 12 frameworks. The unique challenge of teaching essential skills, such as reading, in this setting often creates a cycle in which academic struggles lead to behavioral issues, further impeding learning.

In multigrade classrooms, teachers must navigate a complex and demanding environment. With limited resources, educators are responsible for catering to diverse learning abilities and age groups simultaneously, a considerable challenge. Research by Gholipour et al. (2024) emphasizes that students in such settings may lack specific extracurricular and leisure activities that could alleviate stress. Furthermore, a systematic review highlights significant obstacles—such as resource scarcity and teaching workload—that hinder teachers' ability to provide personalized support, potentially allowing academic or behavioral issues to persist or escalate unnoticed (Recla and Potane, 2023).

These pressures can prompt behavioral responses in students, from withdrawal and inattention to overt disruption. Such actions often signal deeper academic struggles—even in high achievers. Frustration may manifest as disruptive or aggressive conduct, warning signs that educators must recognize. These behaviors often reflect maladaptive reactions to persistent academic challenges (Vaivre-Douret & Hamdioui, 2023; van Aalst et al., 2024; Duarte et al., 2023). Despite studies linking reading challenges to negative outcomes and heavy teacher workloads, a key gap persists: literature lacks specific, practical strategies teachers use to address academic and behavioral challenges in multigrade settings. Unaddressed behavior worsens disruption and inequity. Reviews indicate punitive responses can further marginalize vulnerable students (Tanoja & Sumayo, 2024; Soriano-Molina et al., 2025; Pholphirul et al., 2023).

Assessment methods can heighten stress for students with learning challenges and affect their behavior. Standardized tests in areas of known weakness are significant anxiety triggers. Rutkowski et al. (2023) show that testing time and breaks influence performance, underscoring the importance of the assessment environment. For students with reading difficulties, a prolonged, uninterrupted exam is more than an evaluation; it is an extended encounter with failure, provoking avoidance, anxiety, or disruptive behavior as coping mechanisms. Thus, adopting a holistic perspective is vital—behavioral challenges should be seen not as isolated issues but as expressions in context. Recognizing that the multigrade environment can either mitigate or worsen reading-related stress adds important depth (Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2023).

In Ozamiz City, three schools: Guimad ES (District 8), Mintalar ES (D-5), and Dalapang ES (D6) had illustrated key challenges: resource scarcity, divided teacher attention, and changing student needs. The researcher's experience shows learners with reading difficulties and low CRLA or Phil IRI scores also displayed withdrawal, tantrums, absences, or tardiness, especially during reading tasks. Studying these behavioral issues is crucial. The challenge of offering differentiated reading instruction is closely linked to the psychological impacts of repeated academic failure. These impacts include lowered self-efficacy, negative mindsets, and behavioral disruptions (Tanoja & Sumayo, 2023; Soriano-Molina et al., 2022). Without considering learners' perspectives, interventions may address only surface behaviors, missing underlying frustrations. Therefore, this phenomenological analysis is needed to uncover the core experiences of multigrade students in the three schools, providing the groundwork for empathy-driven, context-specific support strategies for teachers and students (Alda & Gementiza, 2023; Armada, 2023).

The challenge of providing differentiated reading instruction in such an environment is strongly associated with the psychological consequences of repeated academic failure, which research suggests can lead to low self-efficacy, negative academic mindsets, and consequent behavioral disruptions (Tanoja & Sumayo, 2023; Soriano-Molina et al., 2022). If the learners' own perspectives are not considered, interventions may only address superficial behaviors and overlook the underlying frustrations. Therefore, this phenomenological analysis is necessary to identify the fundamental nature of this experience in the three multigrade schools, providing a foundational understanding required for developing effective, empathy-driven and context-specific support strategies for both teachers and students (Alda & Gementiza, 2023; Armada, 2023).

While existing literature had separately established the challenges of multigrade instruction and the link between academic struggle and behavior, a significant gap persists in phenomenologically understanding their intersection. Prior research has largely treated reading difficulties and behavioral problems as distinct issues, failing to capture the nuanced, lived reality of multigrade learners for whom these challenges are inextricably linked. Consequently, the essence of how behavioral issues are personally experienced and meaningfully enacted in response to reading failure within the unique multigrade context remains unexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by delving into these intricate lived experiences, providing a foundational understanding crucial for developing precise and empathetic interventions for this often-overlooked student population (Alda & Gementiza, 2023).

Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design anchored in Moustakas's transcendental phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of multigrade learners with reading difficulties and the behavioral challenges associated with their academic struggles in selected public elementary schools in the Division of Ozamiz City. Through purposive total enumeration, experienced multigrade teachers from Guimad Elementary School, Mintalar Elementary School, and Dalapang Elementary School participated in the study, providing rich and context-specific narratives regarding their classroom experiences. Data were collected through validated semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis, ensuring triangulation and credibility of findings. The gathered data were analyzed using phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, thematic clustering, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to uncover the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection protocols, were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study to ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the research process.

Results and Discussions

Experiences of Multigrade Learners with Reading Difficulties and Their Behavioral Problems in the Classroom

The findings revealed that multigrade learners with reading difficulties commonly experienced emotional distress, withdrawal, and avoidance behaviors that significantly affected their classroom participation. Teachers observed that struggling readers often became passive, silent, hesitant to read aloud, and fearful of making mistakes in front of their classmates. Learners avoided eye contact, refused to participate in reading activities, and demonstrated low self-confidence due to repeated experiences of failure and embarrassment. Several participants noted that learners intentionally avoided reading-related tasks and even absented themselves during scheduled reading sessions such as the ARAL Program because of fear, shame, and anxiety associated with reading aloud. These findings indicate that reading difficulties extend beyond academic concerns and deeply affect the emotional and social functioning of learners. Consistent with Rendon and Agdana (2022), repeated academic failure among struggling readers often leads to anxiety, learned helplessness, and behavioral withdrawal as a form of self-protection.

The study further showed that reading-related stress contributed to disruptive behaviors, emotional outbursts, distraction, and cognitive overload among learners. Teachers reported that struggling readers frequently became easily frustrated, distracted, and emotionally overwhelmed during reading activities. Some learners displayed avoidance behaviors by distracting classmates, refusing to read, crying, becoming angry, or acting out to escape reading tasks. Participants emphasized that these behaviors were not simply disciplinary concerns but manifestations of emotional distress caused by frustration, fear of ridicule, and inability to cope with academic demands. Moreover, learners often struggled to sustain focus, repeatedly decoded words, skipped syllables, and required constant assistance, indicating cognitive overload during reading activities. These findings support the assertions of Yılmaz and Culha (2025), who emphasized that unmet academic needs in multigrade settings frequently result in behavioral disruptions, anxiety, and task avoidance due to accumulated stress and cognitive strain.

Another significant finding highlighted the influence of external and environmental factors contributing to reading difficulties and behavioral problems. Teachers identified limited parental support, lack of follow-up at

home, socioeconomic challenges, and excessive gadget exposure as major contributors to learners' reading struggles and declining motivation. Participants explained that many parents were unavailable due to work demands, leaving learners without adequate literacy support outside the classroom. Teachers also observed that excessive exposure to gadgets reduced learners' interest in reading and diminished appreciation for books and literacy activities. These findings suggest that learners' reading difficulties and behavioral challenges are shaped not only by individual academic limitations but also by broader home and environmental conditions. This aligns with the findings of Reyes and Ching (2024), who emphasized that inconsistent home support and environmental disadvantages significantly affect literacy development and learner engagement in multigrade settings.

Challenges in Managing Behavioral Problems of Learners with Reading Difficulties

The findings revealed that multigrade teachers experienced substantial challenges in managing the behavioral problems of learners with reading difficulties, particularly in balancing classroom attention and instructional support. Teachers consistently described the difficulty of dividing attention between struggling readers requiring individualized assistance and the rest of the multigrade class needing continuous engagement and instruction. Participants emphasized that learners with reading difficulties often demanded additional emotional support, remediation, and behavioral management, which disrupted lesson flow and delayed instruction for other learners. Managing diverse grade levels, varying reading competencies, and behavioral concerns simultaneously created a constant struggle for teachers, especially within limited instructional time. These findings demonstrate that multigrade teaching intensifies the complexity of classroom management and instructional delivery. Similar findings were reported by Literal and Sabud (2025), who explained that multigrade teachers frequently experience stress and divided attention due to the simultaneous management of diverse academic and behavioral needs.

The study also revealed that time constraints, excessive workload, and resource limitations significantly affected teachers' ability to address behavioral and academic concerns effectively. Participants disclosed that preparing multiple lessons, differentiated activities, and instructional materials for several grade levels was exhausting and time-consuming. Teachers struggled to provide individualized remediation because of insufficient instructional time and the overwhelming demand to manage multiple learners simultaneously. Additionally, inadequate reading materials, lack of leveled and multisensory resources, and scarcity of instructional support hindered the implementation of effective interventions for struggling readers. These constraints forced teachers into reactive rather than proactive classroom management approaches. The findings corroborate the work of Bagay (2024) and MAGCHAROEN (2023), who highlighted that resource shortages, excessive workloads, and insufficient instructional support remain persistent barriers in multigrade education.

Another major challenge identified was the emotional strain and cognitive overload experienced by teachers while managing learners' behavioral problems. Participants explained that handling emotional outbursts, absenteeism, distraction, and reading-related frustration required tremendous patience, emotional regulation, and mental energy. Teachers described the constant pressure of making immediate instructional and behavioral decisions while simultaneously maintaining classroom order and supporting struggling learners emotionally. Many participants admitted experiencing fatigue, stress, and emotional exhaustion due to the complexity of multigrade classroom management. These findings indicate that teachers perform not only instructional roles but also emotional and psychological support functions in addressing learners' needs. This supports the findings of Rayas et al. (2025), who emphasized that multigrade teachers often experience emotional fatigue and cognitive overload due to the combined instructional, behavioral, and emotional demands of their profession.

Coping Mechanisms Used by Teachers in Managing Behavioral Challenges of Learners with Reading Difficulties

The findings revealed that teachers employed several adaptive coping mechanisms to address the behavioral and academic challenges of learners with reading difficulties. One of the most prominent strategies identified was instructional adaptation through differentiated and scaffolded instruction. Teachers modified reading activities according to learners' abilities by using leveled reading materials, visual aids, multisensory strategies, simplified tasks, and scaffolded instruction to reduce frustration and encourage participation. Participants

explained that differentiated activities helped learners experience small successes, thereby reducing anxiety and disruptive behavior during reading sessions. Teachers also implemented focused remediation through one-on-one instruction, small-group sessions, and inclusion in reading intervention programs such as ARAL. These findings suggest that proactive instructional adaptation helps minimize emotional distress and behavioral withdrawal among struggling readers. Consistent with Risonar, Rey, and Delima (2024), differentiated and scaffolded instruction are essential in multigrade classrooms to accommodate diverse literacy needs and reduce learner frustration.

The study further showed that collaborative and peer-assisted learning approaches were effective coping mechanisms in managing learners' behavioral challenges. Teachers utilized peer tutoring, buddy reading, reading partnerships, and cooperative group activities to provide low-pressure academic support while promoting social interaction and engagement. Participants observed that struggling learners became more confident and participative when supported by peers rather than being constantly corrected by teachers in public settings. Collaborative strategies also reduced classroom disruptions by keeping learners actively engaged and encouraging mutual assistance among students. These findings align with Wesselmann (2024) and Tanoja and Sumayo (2024), who emphasized that structured peer-assisted learning promotes engagement, reduces off-task behavior, and strengthens inclusive learning environments in multigrade settings.

Another important coping mechanism identified was the use of positive and motivational classroom techniques combined with emotional regulation strategies. Teachers intentionally practiced patience, empathy, encouragement, and positive reinforcement to rebuild learners' confidence and reduce fear of failure. Participants used praise, rewards, reassurance, and supportive classroom routines to create emotionally safe learning environments where learners felt comfortable participating despite their reading difficulties. Teachers also emphasized the importance of clear instructions, adjusted pacing, structured classroom routines, and calm responses to behavioral incidents to minimize cognitive overload and emotional distress. Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of home-school collaboration by communicating with parents and encouraging follow-up reading support at home. These findings demonstrate that behavioral management in multigrade classrooms requires both instructional and socio-emotional interventions to address the root causes of learners' difficulties. Similar findings were reported by Naparan and Castañeda (2021), who emphasized that supportive classroom climates, emotional regulation, and positive reinforcement are crucial strategies for managing learner behavior and sustaining engagement in multigrade settings.

Conclusions

This study concluded that managing the behavioral challenges of learners with reading difficulties in a multigrade setting presents teachers with a complex, systemic dilemma rooted in a destructive academic-emotional cycle. Despite facing profound challenges in balancing attention, severe time constraints, overwhelming workloads, and resource limitations that contribute to significant strain, teachers demonstrate remarkable adaptability and commitment. They employ a comprehensive suite of coping mechanisms, including instructional differentiation, individualized support, collaborative learning, motivational techniques, and structured classroom management, to address the intertwined academic and socio-emotional needs of their students. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of these teacher-driven strategies are inherently constrained by the lack of systemic support. Therefore, effectively breaking the cycle of reading difficulty and behavioral problems is not merely a pedagogical task but a systemic one, requiring institutional commitment to providing targeted training, adequate resources, collaborative structures, and stronger home-school partnerships to empower teachers in their multifaceted role.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, it is recommended that multigrade learners be encouraged to actively participate in reading activities and peer-assisted learning opportunities to strengthen their confidence, reading proficiency, and social interaction skills. Teachers should be provided with continuous professional development focusing on multigrade-specific behavioral management, differentiated instruction, emotional regulation strategies, and self-care practices to address classroom stress and cognitive overload effectively. Parents and guardians are likewise encouraged to establish supportive home literacy environments by promoting regular reading habits, limiting excessive gadget use, and maintaining active communication with teachers to reinforce learners' academic and emotional growth. School administrators and educational

stakeholders should collaboratively provide instructional resources, ready-made multigrade teaching materials, literacy programs, and emotionally supportive working conditions that reduce teacher workload and strengthen classroom interventions. Furthermore, curriculum developers and policymakers are encouraged to prioritize the creation of contextualized multisensory reading materials, equitable support systems, and specialized training programs for multigrade teachers while integrating teacher well-being and classroom climate into educational monitoring frameworks. Finally, future researchers may conduct longitudinal and intervention-based studies examining the effectiveness of peer-assisted learning, emotional regulation strategies, and systemic support programs in improving the reading performance and behavioral outcomes of learners in multigrade settings.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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