

The Teaching-Learning Process in Madrasah Multigrade Classes During the Pandemic: A Phenomenological Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, employing a phenomenological approach, seeks to illuminate the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of Madrasah multigrade teachers during the pandemic. The study involved 14 participants in in-depth interviews and 8 participants in a focus group discussion. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the responses. The research uncovered three fundamental themes in their lived experiences, focusing on establishing flexible teaching practices, adaptive instruction, and continuous assessment for enhanced learning. It also unveiled challenges at different levels, notably the three essential themes: Azatids-related challenges, Madrasah-level challenges, and Kalangkapan-level challenges. Despite these hurdles, the participants demonstrated their resilience through coping mechanisms, including spending their own money, religious obligations, displaying a positive attitude, praying, and self-rewarding. The study's conclusion underscores the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Madrasah multigrade teachers, emphasizing their ability to persist, adapt, and effectively cope with unprecedented changes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The previous COVID-19 pandemic presented a major challenge for educational institutions. In a brief timeframe, schools had to adapt their resources to facilitate complete remote teaching and learning setups. The lockdown measures imposed across the nation required teachers and students to shift from conventional curriculum delivery to remote education (Haron et al., 2021; Ganal et al., 2022; Trindade, Henriques, & Correja, 2023). However, madrasahs, tasked to teach and educate Muslim students in remote areas, still adhered to their traditional way of delivering their instruction despite the transition to online delivery.

Madrasah derived from the Arabic term "madrasah," which translates to "school," and originates from the Arabic root word "dars," signifying a drill-based learning method. Universally, madrasah refers to private Muslim institutions focused on delivering Islamic studies and Arabic fluency (Jamalludin & Cadir, 2017). These institutions are typically privately operated and receive support from foreign donors, particularly from Islamic countries (Husin, 2018; Lamla, 2018).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education issued DepEd Order No. 51, Section 2004, aiming to integrate Arabic language and Islamic Values (ALIVE) into many public institutions nationwide, with the goal of mainstreaming Islamic Education in the Philippine educational sector to strengthen the education the students get from the madrasah they attended to. However, effective implementation of Islamic Values and the Arabic language within the public education system at all levels requires concrete action from the government (Solaiman, 2017), which is a formidable experience shared by many Madrasah teachers.

In Madrasah schools, multigrade instruction is a common practice. Despite the sudden shift in the education landscape from traditional to online distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Madrasahs have largely adhered to traditional teaching methods. This situation poses a challenge for Madrasah teachers as they must adapt their teaching strategies to cater to the needs of Madrasah learners during the pandemic. In traditional Madrasahs, teaching methods often rely heavily on face-to-face interaction, oral instruction, and handwritten materials, fostering a close student-teacher relationship within a physical classroom setting (Steiner, 2011; Sabki & Hardaker, 2013; Arif et al., 2017; Gül, 2018). However, the transition to online teaching presents crucial challenges for Madrasah teachers, which limits their ability to construe what they have followed in the past years. Hence, if these madrasah teachers expand their delivery of instruction and choose to adopt online distance learning, they may encounter Zurgoni et al. (2022) identified challenges, which include adapting curriculum content designed to digital formats, addressing technological disparities among students, maintaining the personal connection and mentorship integral to Madrasah education, and ensuring effective communication and engagement in online classes, which are even more difficult since these are challenges arise during the CoVID-19 pandemic. This transition necessitates innovative approaches to pedagogy and heightened awareness of the unique socio-cultural context of Madrasah education, emphasizing the need for possible solutions to navigate the transition to online learning effectively.

The Muslim population in the Philippines is facing challenges in the Madrasah system, particularly in their educational needs. The reasons for these challenges all stem from the lack of training of the teachers, insufficient instructional materials development workshops, and even limitations in their classroom management. It was even highlighted that due to a lack of funding, teachers resort to conventional teaching. Noting this issue, the study would like to delve into whether the concerns are also true in the context of Alamada in relation to what is being faced in other localities in the Philippines and even abroad, such as in the study of Sali and Marasigan (2020).

The aim of unveiling the lived experiences, problems, and coping mechanisms of these multigrade teachers allows us to get a comprehensive understanding of the prominent factors that may have contributed to their difficulties during the pandemic. This study would definitely grant researchers in the local context and even abroad to get research-based data, allowing them to add to the limited body of research about this field of inquiry. More so, the data unveiled in this research have the potential to offer knowledge on the current pedagogical practices, particularly the way these teachers prepare and design their teaching-learning process.

The study was anchored to Freire's theory of education, the adoption of practice as evidenced in the Madrasah teachers' conceptualization of the instructional process manifesting itself in their pedagogical methods, as observed in the teaching and learning process. This social lens asserts that self-reflection on pedagogical practices is crucial for teachers comprehending transformative education. This allows teachers to grasp theory into practice in developing teaching styles that bring change to the school environment and include learners' relevant experiences in the educative process. According to Freire (1978), the teacher takes on an authoritarian stance in prescriptive instruction; man's transaction is the act of moving information from teachers' heads to student's heads. The children served as depositories while the teacher served as the depositor. According to Freire (1978), no one can teach anyone else; no one learns alone; individuals learn together, acting in and on reality. He pointed out that authoritarian forms of education hinder learners from knowing the world and seeing it as something that can be changed.

In the Philippines, the concept of Madrasah is seen in different perspectives and definitions. According to the views of Jamalludin and Cadir (2017), the dissemination of Islamic teachings and the acquisition of Arabic knowledge is done through the help of madrasah, as it plays a pivotal role in that aspect as a delivering institution. It was even emphasized that among Muslims, the role also encompasses the nurturing of spiritual, moral, physical, and social development.

The concept of Madrasah education in the Philippines encompasses a range of definitions and assumes diverse roles. Jamalludin and Cadir (2017) assert that the madrasah plays a crucial role as an institution for the dissemination of Islamic teachings and the acquisition of Arabic knowledge. The aforementioned factor assumes a pivotal role in fostering the holistic development of individuals adhering to the Islamic faith, encompassing their spiritual, moral, physical, and social dimensions. Educators, commonly referred to as Gurus, Ustadz, Sheikh, or A'lim, are individuals who possess extensive expertise and proficiency in the field of Islamic studies. Religious leaders hold a pivotal position in providing guidance and education to the Muslim community, encompassing individuals of all age groups, such as children, youth, and other constituents. Their primary objective is to foster values and disseminate teachings that foster peace and facilitate societal progress.

Lamla (2018) defines madrasah as private Muslim schools emphasizing Islamic studies and Arabic literacy. These institutions typically rely on financial support from local communities and international sources, predominantly from Islamic or Muslim countries. Madrasahs have historical significance in the Philippines for preserving Islamic faith and culture. They primarily provide a religious foundation, including Quranic recitation, Arabic language and grammar, and Islamic principles. Moreover, they complement mainstream education, especially in elementary and middle school. Lamla categorizes madrasah into three types: (1) Traditional or weekend Madrasah, which offers informal religious education, (2) Madrasah al-edaadi to Madrasah assanaawiy, providing Arabic language instruction and religious subjects; and (3) Standard private Madrasah, now integrated into the Philippine educational system as per DepEd Order No. 51, incorporating Arabic and Islamic values into the curriculum.

However, it is worth noting that many Madrasah teachers may not hold formal teaching qualifications or degrees from higher education institutions. They are expected to fulfill the roles of curriculum strategists, designers, implementers, and evaluators, requiring a strong grasp of pedagogical strategies and subject matter. Unlike Western schools, Madrasahs do not strictly adhere to a standardized curriculum, and Arabic remains the primary language of instruction (Sali & Marasigan, 2020).

Islamic education in the Philippines, like in other countries with a small Muslim population, faces numerous challenges that impact its growth and dynamics. One significant issue confronting the Moro people is the integration of their Islamic way of life into the predominantly Western-influenced Filipino culture. Embracing a multiculturalist perspective on social cooperation can pave the way for the successful incorporation of Islamic education into the national educational system, emphasizing the principle of unity in diversity rather than uniformity. This approach promotes harmonious coexistence and fosters enlightenment, tolerance, and respect, thus liberating individuals from ignorance, distrust, and prejudice (Kulidtod, 2017).

Lamla's (2018) study delved into the prevalent issues and concerns faced by Madrasah teachers (azatids). The study identified several challenges experienced by the asatidz, with varying degrees of seriousness. These challenges encompassed teaching strategies, Madrasah facilities and equipment, teaching resources, Islamic knowledge, training and experience, lesson preparation, Madrasah classroom management, and Madrasah policies and administration. The study revealed that the asatidz encountered difficulties in building positive relationships with students, fellow asatidz, and the local community. Notably, Madrasah facilities and equipment such as toilets, lavatories, safe drinking water, computers, textbooks, reading materials, and learning materials posed significant challenges. Additional concerns pertained to teaching resources, Islamic knowledge, training, experience, lesson preparation, classroom management, and institutional policies and regulations. These challenges collectively impact the quality of education provided to Muslim students in Basilan Province.

Solaiman's (2021) research focused on issues related to the education of youth in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines, particularly in Madaris. The study conducted an analysis of various challenges that were identified, encompassing financial limitations, faculty and staff proficiency, school infrastructure, and the curriculum. In order to effectively tackle these concerns, the study put forth a number of recommendations. The proposed recommendations encompass the deployment of proficient *asatidz*, trainers, and consultants in each madrasah, the revision of teaching materials to augment their pertinence and contemporaneity, the enhancement of current facilities, the implementation of periodic performance evaluations for *asatidz*, the acquisition of foreign scholarships for Madrasah teachers, and the continuous backing from the BARMM government and local government units for conventional Madrasah schools. Moreover, the study underscored the importance of conducting further research to evaluate the indispensability of conventional Madrasahs in diverse areas, encompassing Mindanao, Luzon, and the Visayas.

Alag (2013) conducted a study that investigated the implementation of Madrasah Education in elementary schools located in Digos City. The study identified various significant issues related to this educational approach. The aforementioned concerns pertain to the educational credentials of *asatidz*, the majority of whom possess a minimum of a high school diploma. However, certain cases necessitate additional training in pedagogical techniques and approaches. Furthermore, private Madaris encountered various obstacles, such as inadequate financial support from the government and a deficiency in regulatory supervision. The study underscored the need for continued teacher training to enhance the skills required to support student learning and develop a deeper understanding of roles and responsibilities. Addressing issues arising during routine activities and providing adequate support to students was also highlighted. The study emphasized the importance of technology access, even in rural areas, as high-tech gadgets and equipment are prevalent primarily in urban settings.

The study by Jamalludin and Cadir (2017) delved into the challenges impacting the implementation of ALIVE Schools. These challenges included a lack of permanent infrastructure, limited instructional resources, learners' absenteeism, low and delayed *Asatidz* allowances, and cultural differences among Filipinos. Properly addressing these challenges is crucial to improving the effectiveness of ALIVE Schools and enhancing Islamic education in the Philippines.

Multigrade schools, as defined by Patel and Hoshi (2015) are small educational institutions where a single teacher instructs students of various ages and grade levels simultaneously in one classroom. These classrooms share common characteristics: a single teacher is responsible for teaching two or more distinct grade levels concurrently. The necessity for multigrade schools is driven by various significant factors, encompassing a limited availability of classrooms, a dearth of proficient educators, and insufficient student enrollment to warrant the establishment of distinct classes, particularly in geographically isolated regions. The significance of multigrade schools as a viable solution is underscored by Erdem et al. (2005), Palavan and Göçer (2017), and Samanci et al. (2016), who have all acknowledged these challenges.

The research conducted by Bongala et al. (2019) examined the pedagogical approaches and obstacles faced by educators instructing multiple grade levels in Albay. The researchers identified a range of instructional approaches utilized by educators in multigrade classrooms, including the implementation of diverse activities and the incorporation of peer instruction. Nevertheless, educators in this context encounter pedagogical obstacles that encompass inconsistencies in instructional approaches, challenges with designing effective lessons, suboptimal teaching practices, scarcity of learning resources, insufficient training opportunities, and uncertainties surrounding the efficacy of multigrade instruction.

Naparan and Castaneda (2021) conducted a study examining the challenges encountered by educators teaching multiple grade levels in the western region of the Philippines. The researchers identified a range of issues, including intrinsic, extrinsic, and systemic factors. Coping mechanisms adopted by these teachers included prayer, internet use, time management, self-conditioning, planning, and research. More so, Mortazavizadeh et al. (2017) examined the teaching practices in multigrade classrooms, emphasizing the differences from single-grade settings due to student diversity and varying

learning styles. Akdas and Kalman (2020) conducted a case study comparing pre-pandemic and pandemic-related challenges for multigrade teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to education, with a shift to distance learning due to safety measures (Mone, 2020). The study by Agayon et al. (2022) stressed the adaptability and resilience required of educators in these challenging times. Teaching in multigrade classes, as discussed by Mortazavizadeh (2014), addresses the need for education in remote areas and plays a vital role in improving the teaching-learning process and achieving universal education goals. In situations with limited teachers and increasing student enrollment, combining multiple grades in one classroom with a single teacher became a strategy to support the "Education for All" (EFA) initiative.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This research utilized a phenomenological approach in unveiling the lived experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of the Madrasah multigrade teachers in Alamada amidst the CoVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological research design was utilized in this study because, according to Creswell (2018), this research design allows the description of the meaning of several individuals' lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. The design is fit for the study since the purpose was to describe the phenomenon shared by the Madrasah multigrade teachers during their teaching-learning process. A single instrument, the researcher-developed interview guide, was employed in this study. The interview guide underwent expert validation, with the English version and the translated Iranun version being reviewed separately. An expert in English language and education validated the English interview guide questions, while an Iranun teacher performed the same validation process for the translated Iranun interview guide questions. More so, the participants in this study were purposefully selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, aligning with standard research practices. To meet the inclusion criteria in this study, participants were required to have a minimum of three years of experience as Madrasah multigrade classroom teachers and be vaccinated. Conversely, exclusion criteria were established, which specified that individuals with serious medical conditions, co-morbidities, COVID-19 symptoms, or those identified as persons under investigation by the Department of Health would be excluded from participating. The study included a total of 22 Madrasah multigrade teachers from Alamada, Cotabato, Philippines.

2.2 Data Collection Procedure

The study commenced with securing the approval of the Madaris head in Alamada to conduct the study. Once approval was granted, the researcher identified the twenty-two participants and provided them with a detailed explanation of the research's purpose. The participants were ensured to sign an informed consent form before taking part in the study. Data collection involved conducting one-on-one, in-depth interviews. A focus group discussion was also conducted to further saturate the data.

Before commencing the interview phase, approvals were secured from the Madaris offices, the Campus Director of the University of Southern Mindanao - PALMA Cluster Campuses, and the Madrasah multigrade teacher participants. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely optional and that the information they shared would be handled with the utmost integrity and courtesy and maintained in strict confidentiality. For confidentiality, codes were used to present the participants, like IDI-MMGT1, wherein IDI represents in-depth interviews, T for teachers, and 1 refers to the order or sequence of interviews. FGD stands for focus group discussion, whereas MGGT stands for madrasah multigrade teacher, and 1 refers to the order or sequence of the interview. The participants' rights were thoroughly and explicitly outlined. It was emphasized that their involvement was voluntary, and they had the freedom to withdraw at any point without facing any adverse repercussions. The collected data were securely stored, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed during the presentation of the study in internal reviews and relevant conferences.

2.3 Data Analysis

In this paper, the analysis process involved six essential steps and construed with Colaizzi's (1978) thematic analysis: transcribing the recorded interviews with mark-up techniques for key elements, formulating significant meanings from the transcribed data, categorizing these meanings into clusters of themes and overarching themes, shaping a fundamental structure of the overall experience, engaging in a feedback session with the participants through a focus group discussion, and ultimately finalizing the framework based on participant input. These steps ensured a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the data gathered from the transcribed and translated transcripts.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Lived Experiences of the Madrasah Multigrade Teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The data on the lived experiences of the madrasah multigrade teachers during COVID-19 are summarized into major themes and core ideas in Table 1. This section is an answer to the research question number 1. Moreover, the results revealed three essential themes: establishing flexible teacher practices, adaptive instruction, and continuous assessment for enhanced learning.

Table 1. Lived experiences of madrasah multigrade teachers during the CoVID-19 pandemic

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Establishing Flexible Teaching Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adapting to limitations during the pandemic • pandemic teaching adjustments • teacher's creative approaches • classroom management and health protocols • lesson introduction routine
Adaptive Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lecture-based instruction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classroom discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • peer-teaching • use of demonstration and stories • memorization and Quranic teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • jump-jump method
Continuous Assessment for Enhanced Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continuous assessment • periodic summative examinations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • curriculum progression • responsive teaching

3.2 Establishing Flexible Teaching Practices

In this study, it was unveiled that there are flexible teaching practices the madrasah multigrade teachers are employing and establishing in their classrooms. They made sure that they were adaptive to what they could only offer at their level, especially since they were situated in the context of the pandemic. So, instead of delivering the instruction online, they delivered the lesson in a face-to-face manner, within the purview of strong observance of classroom expectations, rules, and health protocols. It was also emphasized during the interview that they have their own approach to making the learners learn. With this finding, it can be implied that despite the situation, they navigate the constraints imposed by the pandemic situation by employing practices they deem suited to the needs and limitations of the situation. Sali and Ancho (2021) claimed that madrasah multigrade teachers played a lot of activities in the classroom, not only by integrating religious disciplines but also by ensuring secular activities. Carter and Pool (2012) claim that the integration of expectations, rules, and procedures in the classroom fosters a democratic classroom, allowing the learners to get disciplined and be able to enjoy the teaching-learning process despite the pandemic situation.

3.3 Adaptive Instruction

Some participants expressed their use of adaptive strategies in instructional delivery. Their responses indicate that, while some of these strategies may appear rudimentary, they were still effectively employed. Multigrade teachers emphasized the importance of various teaching methods, including lecture-based instruction, classroom discussions, peer teaching, demonstration, storytelling, memorization, Quranic teaching, and the "jump-jump" method for teaching Madrasah students. This finding implies that these participants have transitioned from using a limited set of strategies to a more diverse range despite the lack of training and the limitations of the pandemic situation. This finding aligns with Amri et al.'s (2017) observation that Islamic instructors were previously constrained to memorization and chanting but have now adopted a broader range of strategies. This result supports the earlier study by Bongala et al. (2019), which revealed that using diverse teaching strategies, such as varied activities, classroom discussions, and peer instruction in multigrade classrooms, enhances self-management skills (Mortazavizadeh et al., 2017) and promotes critical learning (Panchina, 2015). Rustham et al. (2013) also noted that while lecture remains a common teaching strategy in Islamic education, it should be modified and diversified using multimedia tools to enhance its impact on information acquisition. It is clearly evident in the sense that despite the situation the teachers face, they did not halt teaching, and they weaved their instruction to the best of their ability to adapt to the situation, which clearly demonstrates their resilience.

3.4 Continuous Assessment for Enhanced Learning

Like all educators, Madrasah teachers also conduct assessments in their classrooms to continuously evaluate their teaching effectiveness and make necessary adjustments to their methods. During interviews, they emphasized the value of student feedback in gaining insights into their teaching practices. In this finding, a clear implication is that these teachers emphasize student feedback, which highlights the importance of incorporating student perspectives into the assessment and improving teaching effectiveness. This practice promotes a student-centred approach, fostering a more dynamic and responsive learning environment. This finding is supported by Sukenti et al.'s (2021) research, which highlights the significance of learning assessment in Islamic education. They stressed that assessments are not meant to identify mistakes or weaknesses but rather to unlock students' potential.

3.5 Challenges of madrasah multigrade teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The data on the challenges of the madrasah multigrade teachers during COVID-19 are summarized into major themes and core ideas in Table 2. This is an answer to the research question number 2. Moreover, the results revealed three essential themes: Azatids-related challenges, madrasah-level challenges, and Kalangkapan-level challenges.

Table 2. Challenges of madrasah multigrade teachers during the CoVID-19 pandemic

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Azatids-related challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of professional development and teaching autonomy • challenges of managing behavior and overcrowded classrooms • teaching stress and fatigue in multigrade classrooms • inadequate honorarium for madrasah teachers
Madrasah-level challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of student interest, seating, and family responsibilities • inadequate facilities and infrastructure

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of equipment for online and modular classes
Kalangkapan-level challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transportation challenges for teachers • lack of support for madrasah from the community • lack of support and assistance from government and higher officials

3.5.1 Azatids related-challenges

These challenges represent the personal experiences of madrasah multigrade teachers in the teaching-learning process, encompassing various struggles and difficulties, as presented in Table 2. In the context of Madrasah multigrade teaching in Alamada, teachers face the challenge of lacking the necessary skills and competencies, and this finding was also supported in the study by Solaiman (2021). This challenge stems from the fact that not all Madrasah employees are college graduates, leading to gaps in knowledge, lesson preparation, and familiarity with modern teaching concepts. Furthermore, the majority of Azatids have only a high school diploma and may require training in teaching methods and technology usage. The absence of specific madrasah education programs focusing on the instructional and teaching-learning process aggravates this issue. Certainly, what encompasses these problems is the lack of professional development, which affects their teaching autonomy inside the classroom. Their absence in seminars and training stems from the small amount of money they receive as remuneration for their service, which completely disadvantages them from opportunities and leaves them to construe what they already know. Khazaei et al. (2016) pointed out that managing multigrade classrooms can be challenging due to the need for teachers to control, monitor, and provide all-around leadership. This, in turn, makes teaching multigrade classes more stressful than single-grade teaching, as noted by Naparan and Castaneda (2021). Financial concerns are another aspect, with multigrade teachers often not receiving adequate monetary allowances, especially in remote areas, and some lacking hazard pay. Alag (2013) highlighted that private madaris often do not receive government funding and might lack remuneration. In contrast to the study's findings, Lamla (2018) stated that some madrasahs receive financial support from local communities and global donors, primarily from Islamic or Muslim countries. Overall, these difficulties highlight the demanding nature of multigrade teaching as well as the need for additional support and resources in Madrasah education.

3.5.2 Madrasah level challenges

The aforementioned challenges are school-level difficulties encountered by madrasah multigrade teachers. Madrasah education faces a number of challenges, including a lack of student interest, insufficient seating, and family responsibilities. Furthermore, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, as well as a lack of equipment for online and modular classes, create significant challenges for educators. Transportation issues for teachers exacerbate these difficulties, emphasizing the importance of improved support and resources in Madrasah education. Facing these difficulties not only leaves the teachers detrimental but also puts the students in a disadvantageous position. Their teaching-learning processes are at stake because they are hampered by the deficiencies they face, and they are even more difficult to address because they are in a pandemic situation. These findings are true to what the researchers Solaiman (2021), Alag (2013), and Lamla (2018) claimed: that the lack of essential facilities in Madrasah institutions is a significant challenge for both madrasah multigrade teachers and students. This lack of basic amenities includes chairs, tables, classrooms, and other learning materials. The lack of these facilities has an impact on learners' academic and extracurricular activities, ultimately limiting their overall growth and well-being. Furthermore, a lack of equipment and gadgets, such as computers and printers, impedes effective teaching methods, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the lack of whiteboards and technology tools, face-to-face classes are limited, limiting learners'

educational experiences in Madrasah institutions. The presence of technological equipment is critical in both urban and rural areas, as Khazaei et al. (2016) argue. The difficulties are worsened by the remote locations of many multigrade classes, making transportation, such as *habal-habal*, a critical concern, as Naparan and Castaneda's (2021) study emphasizes. Teachers frequently face difficult journeys, sometimes involving river crossings, to reach these remote areas, emphasizing the multifaceted challenges of Madrasah education.

3.5.3 Kalangkapan level challenges

These are the challenges that teachers in multigrade classrooms face that go beyond the scope of Madrasah education. Madrasah multigrade teachers face a number of challenges outside of the classroom, such as a lack of community support and insufficient assistance from the government and higher officials. The current study's findings reveal a significant lack of community support, mirroring the findings made by Naparan and Castaneda (2021). They emphasized parents' negative attitudes toward multigrade teaching and the overall lack of support from stakeholders. This is in stark contrast to Silverstone's (2008) reports, which stated that the establishment of Madrasah education historically resulted from a collaborative effort between parents and community leaders. These disparities highlight the changing challenges faced by Madrasah multigrade teachers, as well as the shifting dynamics of community involvement in Madrasah education. Madrasah teachers express deep emotional distress as a result of the government's and higher officials' overwhelming lack of support and assistance. They believe they are undervalued and unimportant, which is largely due to a lack of government support. The current study emphasizes teachers' difficulties in areas not covered by the BARRM, leaving them unable to seek assistance. The teachers' desire for government recognition, support, and access to public funds to improve facilities and provide student comfort highlights their quest for better working conditions. These sentiments align with the findings revealed by Alag (2013), who noted that the majority of private madaris receive no government aid or supervision, adding weight to the issue of governmental neglect in Madrasah education.

3.6 Coping mechanisms of madrasah multigrade teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic

To mitigate the challenges and alleviate stress while managing madrasah multigrade classes, teachers have shared valuable experiences that have proven effective in their roles. These experiences have coalesced into five distinct coping mechanisms, as outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Coping mechanisms of madrasah multigrade teachers during the CoVID-19 pandemic

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Spending own money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> personal financial sacrifice dedication to student learning
Religious Obligations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> religious duty as motivation passing on knowledge for the future
Displaying positive attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> importance of patience in teaching patience as a virtue in difficult situations
Praying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reliance on prayer for strength and stress relief
Self-reward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> coping through self-rewards and social activities

3.7 Spending own money

During the interviews, teachers disclosed that they often dip into their own pockets to bridge the resource gaps. When navigating the situation, they purchase essential supplies such as chalk and bond papers and even cover their transportation expenses. Essentially, these educators exhibit unwavering

dedication as they willingly invest their personal funds to ensure their students have the necessary tools for learning despite the meager salaries they receive. This poignant revelation resonates with the findings of Agayon et al. (2022), who similarly highlighted how teachers, when faced with scarce resources and classroom material shortages, resort to utilizing their own financial resources to fill the void.

3.8 Religious obligations

For these devoted madrasah teachers, their commitment to teaching is not only a profession but a profound religious obligation. It can be sensed out from their actuations that they see their profession beyond teaching, that it is a duty guided with sacred vows to the Almighty Allah. Despite their situations, navigating their way to teaching-learning processes is tolerable because of their divine solitude towards their profession. Sali (2020) underscores that they view their role as a divine responsibility, transcending the conventional concept of a job. In the current study, it became evident that the participants strongly believed that knowledgeable Muslims have a sacred duty to disseminate their Islamic wisdom to the wider Muslim community. Furthermore, the majority of participants emphasized that educating the younger generation, particularly Muslim students, involves much more than conventional pedagogy. They stressed that their primary aim is to impart Islamic knowledge, making it a higher aspiration. Consequently, fulfilling the responsibilities of madrasah teachers is seen as a tangible expression of their devotion to the Islamic faith (Sali & Ancho, 2021). These profound religious convictions motivate their pursuit of teaching within the madrasah education system, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Allah in the Holy Quran and the Hadith of Prophet Muhammad. In the face of challenges during the teaching-learning process, these religious obligations serve as a strong coping mechanism, reinforcing their commitment to their students and faith.

3.9 Displaying positive attitude

In the face of numerous challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Madrasah teachers have displayed a positive attitude by exemplifying the virtue of patience (*sabr*) as a powerful coping mechanism. It can be clearly noted that the teachers, when in the context of teaching-learning processes and as they navigate the pandemic situation, demonstrate a quality deeply embedded in every Muslim heart, embodies perseverance, endurance, and self-control, enabling them to persist in their teaching roles despite the scarcity of resources. This displayed coping mechanism of multigrade teachers is echoed in the phenomenological study of Beleganio and Madrigal (2022), who emphasize that, despite adversities, these multigrade teachers maintain their unwavering commitment to facilitating learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.10 Praying

In the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the coping mechanisms embraced by Madrasah multigrade teachers is prayer. They rely on the blessings of the Almighty and believe that what they do glorifies the Almighty creator. It can be implied that while navigating the situation, these teachers still do not forget their holy omnipotent Allah. They face this situation not only in their resilience but also in their strong faith in Allah. As supported by the study of Naparan and Castaneda (2021), these teachers find solace and strength in Islamic values and prayer during times of difficulty and adversity. The power of prayer serves as their support system, enabling them to navigate the hurdles of the teaching-learning process during the pandemic. This reflects the profound role of faith and spirituality in helping them endure and find resilience in the face of the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

3.11 Self-reward

Madrasah teachers have recognized the significance of self-reward as a coping mechanism during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just like any individual, they experience stress and fatigue, making self-reward essential for regaining motivation and focus. It can be gleaned from the finding that these teachers do not forget to have a work-and-life balance. Although struggling their profession is, they still allow themselves to free from these by giving themselves a break in the form of reward. Studies such as Nang et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of supporting teachers to reduce pressure and acknowledge their dedication through rewards and attending social activities. This practice not only alleviates the burdens faced by Madrasah teachers but also serves as a motivational tool to help them navigate the complexities of the teaching-learning process during the pandemic.

4. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, this study has shed light on the lived experiences of Madrasah multigrade teachers in the context of the teaching-learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has reshaped the landscape of education, posing numerous challenges and restrictions for these madrasah multigrade teachers, who were compelled to adapt to face-to-face instruction while ensuring students' safety and well-being. It can be gleaned that the results of this research highlighted that teachers are engrossed in improving the learning process by establishing flexible teaching practices, employing adaptive instruction, and conducting continuous assessments. However, it is a glaring opportunity to see that during the pandemic, numerous challenges were experienced by the participants, and these have been unique to everyone, leading them to feel unprepared for the circumstances. Among the predicaments encountered were the Azatid-related challenges, madrasah-level challenges, and Kalangapan-level challenges. Facing these challenges was very difficult, and these were coping with through spending their own money, doing religious obligations, praying, displaying a positive attitude, and self-reward.

Considering the insights provided, it is fundamental that the Department of Education, Local Government Units, and even the Madaris community help our Madrasah teachers cope with their problematic situation. It does not necessarily mean that they can cope with the situation; they may no longer need assistance. There has to be intervention and careful review of the preparation and management so that it is certain that the curriculum is achieved and the quality education is not jeopardized because of the many limitations faced. It is then therefore recommended that they should be given opportunities to attend trainings or seminars to improve their pedagogy. The government must allot funds for building Madrasah schools to allow both the teachers and the students to have conducive teaching-learning processes.

Although the research benefits readers by providing salient findings and notable insights regarding their teaching-learning process, there were some limitations that need to be considered for possible future research trajectories. The research only focused on one municipality, so follow-up research can be done, considering expanding the scope to other municipalities or in other regions such as BARM, where Madrasa classes are conducted to see some local or regional differences with regards to the effects the COVID-19 pandemic brought upon their lives. By doing so, capturing diverse perspectives, identifying common challenges across regions, or uncovering unique regional variations in the experiences of Madrasah multigrade teachers during a pandemic can be elucidated. The research was also limited to phenomenological research design. Therefore, we suggest that future researchers may use multiple case studies to explore more the cases of these teachers' intricate preparation in their teaching-learning process.

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