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Root Causes of Non-Reading and Struggling Reading in Filipino: Towards Developing Courses of Action and Development of Reading Program Conceptual Models

Raquel M. Reapor* 

Central Bicol State University of Agriculture
Camarines Sur, Philippines

Abstract. Despite the sustained implementation of literacy programs by the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines, non-reading and struggling reading in the Filipino language continue to persist in high school. This study aimed to (a) examine the underlying causes of such reading difficulties based on the lived experiences of students and the perspectives of parents, teachers, and selected DepEd officials; (b) propose appropriate courses of action; and (c) develop conceptual models for reading programs. Data was gathered through interviews, memoing, and focus group discussions among a total of 36 participants and were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that non-reading was primarily associated with limited social resources, challenges in social adjustment, experiences of mistreatment and discrimination, and negative attitude toward reading. Struggling readers, on the other hand, were affected by issues related to educational quality, inadequate learning resources, limited social support, developmental disabilities, mental and emotional challenges, family interdependence, and attitudes toward reading. Based on these findings, the study recommended strengthening learning support networks, engaging experts and individuals with specialized training, revisiting and enhancing teacher education curricula, and implementing relevant and sustainable extension programs. Two conceptual models for reading programs were developed, anchored on the identified root causes. The findings underscore that effective reading interventions must be responsive to the actual needs of non-readers and struggling readers, as perceived by DepEd officials and parents. The study contributes to literature by addressing the persistent gap between literacy challenges identified since 2018 and the literacy programs implemented by DepEd from 2002 to 2024.

Keywords: Department of Education; Filipino language; non-readers; struggling readers; reading models

*Corresponding author: Raquel M. Reapor; raquel.reapor@cbsua.edu.ph

1. Introduction

Reading is an essential literacy skill that enables learners to decode symbols and construct meaning, serving as a prerequisite for academic participation and lifelong learning (Ferolino, 2023; Main & Paolino, 2023; Redulfin, 2024). In recognition of its central role in education, the Philippine government, through the Department of Education (DepEd), has implemented a series of literacy-focused policies and programs since 2002 to strengthen reading instruction across basic education.

Key initiatives include the DepEd Order No. 45, S. 2002, titled *Reading Literacy Program in the Elementary Schools*, which emphasized the mastery of required literacy skills prior to grade promotion; the DepEd Order No. 70, 2011, which provided guidelines on fund utilization for the *Every Child a Reader Program* (ECARP), the *Reading Recovery Program* (RRP), and *Philippine Informal Reading Inventory* (Phil-IRI); and the DepEd Order No. 12, 2015, the *Early Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program*, aimed at developing literacy skills from Kindergarten to Grade III. These were followed by DepEd Memorandum No. 173, 2019, *Hamon: Bawat Bata Bumabasa*, which focused on reading proficiency, and DepEd Memorandum No. 024, 2022, which adopted the *Basic Education Development Plan 2030* (BEDP 2030) to address quality-of-education concerns exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2023, DepEd Memorandum Order No. 013, 2023 institutionalized the *National Learning Recovery Program* (NLRP), including the *National Reading Program* (NRP), to improve national assessments outcomes. In 2024, DepEd Order No. 001, 2024 introduced *Catch-up Fridays* as a nationwide reading initiative, while Republic Act (RA) No. 12028, or the *Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program Act*, established a national learning intervention framework. More recently, DepEd Order No. 034, 2025 issued supplemental guidelines for the *Literacy Remediation Program*, followed by DepEd Order No. 018, 2025, which provided implementing guidelines for the ARAL Program pursuant to Republic Act No. 12028. Collectively, these policies aim to ensure all learners achieve functional literacy by the end of Grade 10.

Despite these sustained efforts, non-readers and struggling readers persist at both elementary and secondary levels (Albano, Jr., 2021; World Bank, 2022, as cited in Department of Education, 2025b). National and regional reports—including documentary evidence, legislative records, and regional education data—indicate that a significant number of learners reach junior and senior high school without functional reading proficiency, including in Filipino (Abarca, 2025; GMA Public Affairs, 2018; “High school non-readers: Failure of divisions and elementary schools—DepEd,” 2019; Magsino, 2020; Senate of the Philippines, 2025). These conditions challenge constitutional guarantees of quality education and the country’s commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 4 (Department of Education, 2013; United Nations, n.d.).

1.1 Research Gap

Evidence from the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) confirms that reading difficulties in the Philippines predate the COVID-19 pandemic (Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024). Despite the implementation of multiple literacy initiatives over the past two decades, the persistence of non-readers and struggling readers suggests that interventions have often been fragmented and insufficiently informed by learners' contexts and experiences. Notably, there remains limited qualitative research examining reading difficulties in Filipino from the lived experiences of non-readers and struggling readers, and the perceptions of their parents and education officials. Many reading interventions have been designed without systematically capturing how learners experience, interpret, and make sense of their reading difficulties. From a phenomenological perspective, this gap reinforces the need to foreground participants' meanings and realities to inform more context-responsive, learner-centered, and sustainable reading interventions.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to examine the root causes of non-reading and struggling reading among high school learners, and to inform the development of responsive reading interventions. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What are the root causes of non-reading and struggling reading based on learner's lived experiences and selected DepEd officials' and parents' perspectives?
2. What courses of action can be proposed to support non-readers and struggling readers?
3. What reading program conceptual models can be integrated into the DepEd ARAL Program Framework to enhance reading skills, particularly in Filipino?

1.3 Research Significance

The persistence of non-readers and struggling readers in the Philippines reflects a broader global concern regarding enduring reading difficulties among school-aged learners. International studies report similar patterns across contexts: Peng et al. (2024) identified struggling readers from Grades 3 to 12 across 52 studies; Xu et al. (2024) found that senior high school students in Chongqing, China, demonstrated only intermediate English literacy levels; Australian Grade 9 students performed up to three years below expected reading levels based on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results (Goss et al., 2016, as cited in Main & Paolino, 2023); declining reading interest was reported among students in Indonesia (Rohman & Imaniar, 2023); and high proportions of learners reading at the frustration level were documented in Ghana and Nigeria (Agbofa, 2023; Obiegbo, 2018).

Within this international landscape, the present study contributes context-specific evidence by identifying the root causes of non-reading and struggling reading in the Philippine setting. Grounded in learners' lived experiences and perspectives of selected DepEd officials parents, the study proposes contextually responsive courses of action and reading program conceptual models. By focusing on Filipino language literacy at the junior and senior high school levels, the findings offer empirical insights that may inform more needs-based sustainable reading

interventions and policy development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors Influencing Non-Reading and Struggling Reading

Extant literature identifies non-reading and struggling reading as multifactorial, shaped by interacting learner-, teacher-, school-, and parent-related conditions. Learner-related factors commonly include negative emotions toward reading (Rosano et al., 2025), unfavorable attitudes and behaviors (Redulfin, 2024), low interest in reading (Castro, 2024; Kilag et al., 2023; Rohimah, 2021), and low self-confidence (Castro, 2024). Cognitive and skill-based challenges, such as limited phonemic awareness (Amponsah & Mohammed, 2018, as cited in Castro, 2024), weak foundational reading skills, and limited access to reading materials (Kilag et al., 2023) further impede literacy development. Psychological well-being and physical health have likewise been shown to influence reading performance (Rohimah, 2021).

Teacher-related factors significantly affect reading outcomes, particularly low pedagogical competence in reading instruction (Aguye & Berlie, 2024; Ortega, Jr., & Sumayo, 2024), inadequate training (Agbofa, 2023; Rosano et al., 2025), insufficient monitoring of learners progress (Castro, 2024), and low teacher motivation (Wang & Eccles, 2017, as cited in Ortega, Jr. & Sumayo, 2024). These challenges are compounded by literacy incompetence (Librea et al., 2023 as cited in Jimenez, 2023), the non-use of differentiated instructional materials (Rebucias, 2024), limited awareness of learners' backgrounds (Ferolino, 2023), and difficulty recognizing individual learner differences (Davis et al., 2016, as cited in Ferolino, 2023).

At the institutional level, school-related factors include inadequate educational resources (Rosano et al., 2025), large class sizes, and misalignment between the written, taught, and assessed curricula (Abejuela et al., 2023, as cited in Jimenez, 2023). The lack of a reading-positive environment, weak implementation of reading interventions, limited professional development opportunities, insufficient stakeholder collaboration, and unclear institutional roles in literacy support further contribute to persistent reading difficulties (Rebucias, 2024; Tatel-Suatengco & Florida, 2020, as cited in Jimenez, 2023).

Parental and home-related factors also play a critical role. Unsupported home literacy environments (Rosano et al., 2025), limited parental involvement (Librea et al., 2023, as cited in Jimenez, 2023; Redulfin, 2024; Tomas et al., 2021, as cited by Castro, 2024), and minimal family literacy practices (Tatel-Suatengco & Florida, 2020, as cited in Jimenez, 2023) have been consistently associated with poor outcomes. Limited parental attention and inadequate home-based reading support further restrict learners' opportunities for sustained literacy development (Redulfin, 2024; Rohimah, 2021).

2.2 Teaching Programs and Instructional Strategies for Reading Improvement

The literature documents a range of structured programs and instructional strategies designed to improve reading skills of non-readers and struggling

readers. Program-level interventions include remedial reading programs (Ferolino, 2023), targeted reading interventions (Rebucias, 2024), and literacy initiatives that cultivate reading engagement while strengthening foundational skills (Kilag et al., 2023). These approaches emphasize systematic instruction and learner-specific remediation.

At the instructional level, effective strategies include varied and multisensory teaching approaches (Redulfin, 2024), as well as traditional, attention-focused, and mind-map interactive reading models that support comprehension and engagement (Lestari et al., 2023). For learners with special education needs, tailored multisensory strategies combined with co-teaching models have shown effectiveness (Adapon & Mangila, 2020 and Bernardo et al., n.d., as cited in Jimenez, 2023). Across contexts, effective reading instruction is associated with the integration of instructional adjustments, strategic teaching, and scaffolding to accommodate diverse learner needs (Davis, 2016, as cited in Ferolino, 2023).

2.3 Conceptualizing Root Cause Analysis

Root cause analysis is widely described as a systematic approach to identifying the underlying reasons for persistent problems. Bohannan (2024) defined it as a process that targets fundamental causes rather than surface-level symptoms to enable sustainable solutions. Similarly, Graber et al. (2024) likened root cause analysis to a diagnostic procedure that examines both the primary and contributing factors to inform appropriate interventions. Supporting these views, Srinivasaragavan et al. (2024) emphasized that complex educational challenges, including reading difficulties, typically arise from multiple interrelated causes, highlighting the need for comprehensive and integrative analysis.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine non-reading and struggling reading in Filipino from the perspectives of those directly affected. While existing literature has established that reading difficulties are shaped by interacting structural, relational, and individual factors, much of this work relies on externally defined variables and program-level evaluations, offering limited insight into how such factors are experienced and interpreted by learners and their families. A phenomenological approach was therefore appropriate, as it foregrounds participant's lived experiences as primary source of meaning (Dwivedi, 2025).

To strengthen analytic rigor, methodological triangulation was employed through the inclusion of multiple participant groups and qualitative sources. This allowed the examination of convergent and divergent perspectives and supported the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings without privileging a single viewpoint (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021, as cited in Madugu & Ibrahim, 2024; Flick, 2004, as cited in Madugu & Ibrahim, 2024; Boyd, 2000, as cited in Farahiba et al., 2025).

3.2 Setting

Interviews and memoing activities were conducted at Schools A and B, both Department of Education–Camarines Sur (DepEd-Cam Sur) cooperating schools of the Central Bicol State University of Agriculture-College of Development Education (CBSUA-CDE). The focus group discussions (FGDs) were held at the Central Bicol State University of Agriculture (CBSUA). All data collection activities took place in Pili, Camarines Sur.

3.3 Participants

Non-readers and struggling readers were identified and recommended for participation by their respective Filipino Reading Coordinators. Criterion sampling (Khan et al., 2025) was used to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the root causes of non-reading and struggling reading in Filipino. The non-reader participants consisted of three learners from School A and two from School B. Among these were three Grade 7 learners, one Grade 9 learner, and one Grade 12 learner. The struggling reader group included 20 learners: three Grade 7 learners, four Grade 8 learners, four Grade 9 learners, five Grade 10 learners, and four Grade 12 learners, evenly distributed between the two schools.

Participants in the FGD were endorsed by DepEd-Cam Sur through the Office of the Curriculum Implementation Department (CID). These included the CID chief, three program supervisors, one public school district supervisor (PSDS), two school principals, two parents of non-readers, and two parents of struggling readers, for a total of eleven participants. Selection was based on involvement in the PISA conducted in selected DepEd schools in Cam Sur in either 2018 or 2022, where reading is a core assessed domain (Second Congressional Commission on Education, 2024).

3.4 Instrumentation

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and memoing to elicit non-readers' and struggling readers' lived experiences, and FGD to draw out the perceptions and reflections of selected DepEd officials, and parents on non-reading and struggling reading. Semi-structured interviews enabled in-depth exploration of individual experiences while allowing participants to articulate meanings in their own words (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, as cited in Khan et al., 2025; Panyasai & Ambele, 2025; Pontillas, 2025; Rubin & Rubin, 2011, as cited in Dwivedi, 2025).

Interview questions were open-ended and administered in the local language to ensure clarity and cultural relevance (Korstjens & Moser, 2017, as cited in Panyasai & Ambele, 2025; Roberts, 2020, as cited in Panyasai & Ambele, 2025). The interview guide underwent content validation by three Filipino Reading Coordinators and was pilot tested with three Filipino teachers to ensure alignment with the research objectives and ethical soundness (Naz et al., 2022, as cited in Panyasai & Ambele, 2025).

FGDs complemented the interviews by capturing shared beliefs, collective interpretations, and institutional perspectives on the causes of non-reading and

struggling reading (Barbour, 2018, as cited in Geampana & Perrotta, 2024; Nyumba et al., 2018, as cited in Geampana & Perrotta, 2024; Powell & Single, 1996, as cited in Khan et al., 2025). A researcher-developed FGD guide, likewise, validated and pilot tested, was used to facilitate structured yet flexible discussion (Bajnok et al., 2024; Taherdoost, 2021, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025). Memoing served as a supplementary strategy to document learners' observable behaviors and interactions during reading activities, generating contextual data that supported the interpretation of interview and FGD findings (Given, 2008).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, FGDs, and memoing from September to December 2025 in two public secondary schools in Camarines Sur. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to participants' contexts, particularly when discussing potentially challenging experiences (Panyasai & Ambele, 2025). Responses were documented verbatim.

The FGD was conducted with informed consent and was audio- and video-recorded, with field notes taken to capture non-verbal interactions and group dynamics (Austin & Satton, 2014, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025). Participants recorded key responses on meta cards, organizing them collaboratively, and elaborated on their meanings during discussion. The moderator facilitated deeper discussion through paraphrasing and follow-up prompts (Kluger et al., 2024, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025). Most data were generated in Bicol and Filipino, and were translated into English by the researcher, ensuring semantic and contextual equivalence (Ulwiyah, 2021). The researcher's background in Filipino education and proficiency in the local language supported accurate translation, while Grammarly was used as a supplementary tool to enhance clarity and grammatical consistency.

3.6 Analysis of Data

Data analysis was guided by the Step-by-Step Process Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research framework (Naeem et al., 2023), which supports systematic coding, theme development, and theory-building grounded in participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Naeem et al., 2023; Liebenberg et al., 2020, as cited in Naeem et al., 2023; Xu & Zammit, 2020, as cited in Naeem et al., 2023). This approach aligned with the phenomenological aim of moving from lived experience to thematic meaning and conceptual understanding.

Transcripts, recordings, and memos were repeatedly examined to identify patterns and relationships across accounts. For this article, analytic emphasis is placed on coding, theme development, and conceptual model construction, which informs the identification of root causes and the formulation of context-responsive courses of action.

3.7 Ethics

The study adhered to established ethical protocols for qualitative research (Meriste et al., 2016, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025). Informed consent (Munhall,

2018, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025; O'Sullivan et al., 2021, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025) was obtained from learner participants and all FGD participants after clear explanation of the study's purpose and procedures (Breen, 2006, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025; Kubacki & Rundle-Thiele, 2016, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025; Lanshima & Abdulkarim, 2021, as cited in Mwilongo, 2025).

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Explicit consent was obtained for audio and video recording of the FGD (Khan et al., 2025). Participants and school identities were protected through pseudonyms, and all data were used solely for research purposes. Considering all these guidelines, participants have shown their active participation in the group discussion.

4. Results

A qualitative analysis of interviews, FGDs, and memoing data yielded differentiated root causes of non-reading and struggling reading in Filipino, grounded in participants' lived experiences and corroborated by DepEd officials and parents. Four themes characterized the experiences of non-readers, while seven among struggling readers, reflecting greater complexity and layered constraints. In addition, the analysis yielded four courses of action addressing the identified challenges.

4.1 Identifying the Root Causes of Non-Reading

Four themes emerged from the accounts of non-readers: (i) unavailability of social resources, (ii) separation and difficulty in social adjustment, (iii) mistreatment and discrimination, and (iv) attitudes toward reading.

4.1.1 Unavailability of social resources

Non-readers consistently reported limited instructional support at home. Participants from both Schools A and B indicated that no adult regularly assisted them with reading activities, attributing their non-reading status to the absence of parental guidance often linked to caregivers' work demands.

Grade 9 learner: *"Nobody taught me how to read."*

Grade 12 learner: *"I am not being taught how to read at home."*

Grade 7 learner (c): *"My parents are busy. They don't have time to teach me."*

Likewise, a parent of one non-reader attributed their zero to minimal involvement in their children's literacy development, to practical constraints.

Parent (a): *"I have ten children. As a solo parent, I work early in the morning until evening from Monday to Sunday to provide for our food and for the things needed in school, (as much as possible) for all my children. I admit that I do not have the time to teach them with their reading drill activities. I already entrust [sic] their learning to the teachers."*

FGD participants corroborated these accounts, emphasizing that limited parental monitoring constrains early literacy development.

Supervisor (a): *“The parents must do the constant and close monitoring of the learning of their children, especially the non-readers, and struggling readers.”*

4.1.2 Separation and difficulty in social adjustment

Several non-readers described experiences of family separation and changes in caregiving arrangements. These experiences were associated with reduced focus on learning and disrupted learning routines and motivation.

Grade 7 learner (b): *“My mother and father have their own families. I live with my grandparents, and I do not care if I do not know how to read.”*

Grade 7 learner (a): *“When I was in Grade 2, I knew how to read. However, when my mother left for abroad, I lost my focus and motivation until, little by little, I forgot to read even the letters.”*

4.1.3 Mistreatment and discrimination

Non-readers reported experiences of bullying related to their inability to read. These experiences were primarily peer-related and occurred within the school setting.

Grade 7 learner (c): *“I experienced bullying because I do not know how to read. This experience lost my interest in reading.”*

Grade 12 learner: *“My classmates are bullying me because I cannot read.”*

School leaders acknowledged the presence of emotional challenges associated with such experiences.

Principal (b): *“For the parents, please help process the feelings of the students, especially if they encountered bad experiences in school.”*

4.1.4 Attitudes toward reading

Some non-readers openly expressed and acknowledged disinterest in reading activities. These attitudes were described as long-standing and habitual.

Grade 12 learner: *“I always feel lazy, and I am not interested in reading.”*

Grade 9 learner: *“Since childhood, I have always wanted to play rather than listen to my teacher. This is the reason why I did not learn how to read.”*

4.2 Identifying the Root Causes of Struggling Reading

For struggling readers in Schools A and B, the root causes of struggling reading in Filipino encompassed (i) issues related to the quality of education, (ii) lack of essential learning resources, (iii) unavailability of social resources, (iv) the presence of developmental disabilities, (v) mental and emotional disturbances, (vi) a culture of family interdependence, and (vii) attitudes toward reading.

4.2.1 Issues on quality of education

Struggling readers reported difficulties in word recognition and decoding.

Grade 7 learner (d): *"I lack sufficient knowledge to read some of the words".*

This perspective was further supported by education officials, citing systemic gaps in teacher preparation.

CID Chief: *"The subject/course Teaching Beginning Reading is not found in the Teacher Education Curriculum of the Commission on Higher Education. I suspect this is the main reason for the tremendous increase in struggling readers."*

PSDS: *"The teachers do not have the capacity to write PISA-like questions. This is one of the reasons why we have poor PISA results in Reading. [Math and Science]."*

4.2.2 Lack of essential requirements for learning

Participants reported limited access to learning materials and basic necessities. For example, one Grade 9 learner from School B stated:

Grade 9 learner (c): *"I do not have books or other materials to be used in practicing reading."*

School administrators noted that some learners attend school without sufficient food or supplies.

Principal (a): *"Amidst the government support through the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), we can see that the poor students are still our problem. They come to school without paper, pencil, and other things needed for learning."*

Principal (b): *"There are some students who come to school without even taking their breakfast; their five pesos 'baon' (allowance) is not enough to buy a nutritious meal at lunchtime."*

4.2.3 Unavailability of social resources

Struggling readers described minimal guidance at home during early reading development.

Grade 8 learner (c): *"Nobody taught me how to read words at home."*

Grade 9 learner (a): *"Since childhood, I have had difficulty in reading. My parents could not help me on [sic] this."*

Grade 10 learner (d): *"I was not taught how to read well at home."*

4.2.4 Existence of developmental disabilities

Developmental disabilities, including cognitive impairments and learning disabilities, were identified as significant contributors to reading difficulties among struggling readers.

a) Cognitive impairment

Several participants reported challenges with letter recognition, sequencing, and sound-symbol correspondence.

Grade 7 learner (a): *"I always interchange the letters when I read in Filipino. I am confused about how to read the letters correctly."*

Grade 9 learner (d): *"I usually forgot to give sound to some of the letters."*

Grade 8 learner (a): *"I do not recognize some of the letters."*

Grade 8 learner (b): *"I am often confused when reading the letter in Filipino. Sometimes, I do not know how to read the next after I read the previous letter."*

Grade 12 learner (d): *"When I had a road accident, I experienced difficulty in reading."*

b) Learning disabilities

Some learners described persistent decoding and fluency difficulties.

Grade 10 learner (a): *"I stutter every time I read words in Filipino."*

Grade 12 learner (a): *"I have a great deal of difficulty reading unfamiliar words in Filipino."*

Grade 8 learner (d): *"I have difficulty reading in Filipino, especially when the word is jumbled."*

4.2.5 Mental and emotional disturbances

During the FGD, school administrators and supervisors reported that family-related emotional stressors negatively influence students' concentration, motivation, and capacity to engage in learning tasks.

- Principal (a): *"Some students come to school confused and at a loss because they are victims of broken families."*
- Supervisor (c): *"Some students are discouraged to learn [sic] because their parents are always fighting in front of them."*

4.2.6 Culture of family interdependence

Several participants from Schools A and B reported that economic responsibilities and household obligations limited their time and capacity to engage in reading practice and academic tasks.

- Grade 9 learner (b): *"I work in construction as an extra. That is why I could not study reading at home."*
- Grade 12 learner (b): *"I am working at the sugarcane farm to help with the finances at home."*
- Grade 8 learner (c): *"I do not have time to practice reading at home because of too many household chores. I also babysit my younger sibling."*
- Grade 8 learner (d): *"I cannot study well at home because I am taking care of my father's chickens, and I am doing many other tasks."*
- Grade 10 learner (e): *"Sometimes, I am asked not to come to school to babysit my younger sibling because my parents will go to work."*

4.2.7 Attitudes toward reading

Struggling readers described the avoidance of reading due to digital media use and leisure activities.

- Grade 7 learners (b & c): *"Most of my time is spent on social media. I do not give time for practicing reading."*
- Grade 10 learner (e): *"I was addicted to gadgets. Every day, I always play online games."*
- Grade 10 learner (b): *"I am always with my cellphone when I wake up in the morning and before I fall asleep in the evening."*
- Grade 10 learner (c): *"I am playing basketball and hanging out with friends, and I intentionally avoid reading."*

Parents and supervisors similarly noted difficulties in sustaining learners' reading discipline at home.

- Parent (a): *"I always tell my child not to hang out with friends too much...listen to us and respect us. I told him that I want him to enhance his reading skills, and it is my dream to finish his studies. Yet, he didn't listen."*

Parent (b): *“She is always with her cellphone, that is why she cannot focus on her reading activities at home. Every time I asked her to study at home, she always demanded a condition, such as she will study if I cook her favorite meal or buy the shoes she wants. Aside from this, her father gives her additional money when she comes home. We do all these in exchange for her promise that she will study reading at home.”*

In response to these observations, one supervisor emphasized the need to “*revisit the value system*”.

4.3 Participant-Identified Responses to Reading Difficulties

Analysis of learner, and FGD participant accounts yielded four categories of responses to reading difficulties: (i) strengthening learner support networks, (ii) utilization of individuals with reading-related expertise, (iii) rectifying curriculum-related concerns in teacher preparation, and (iv) requests for institution-led extension support.

4.3.1 Strengthening learner support networks

Participants emphasized closer communication among learners, parents, teachers, and the community, focusing on parental involvement, emotional support, and monitoring of learners’ academic activities.

Principal (a): *“For parents, please help process the feelings of the students, especially if they encountered bad experiences in school.”*

Program Supervisor (c): *“Parents must follow up on their children's lessons and assignments at home. They should also attend Home Room Parents and Teachers Association’s (PTA) meetings to stay informed. We need to establish a partnership.”*

Prinsipal (b): *“The parents must do the constant monitoring of the learning of their children, especially the non-readers and struggling readers.”*

4.3.2 Use of individuals with reading-related expertise

Participants suggested leveraging teachers and community members with reading expertise to support learners.

Program Supervisor (a): *“Form a group of parents to teach the non-readers and the struggling readers; invite the retired kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers to teach the non-readers and the struggling readers; give them an honorarium.”*

4.3.3 Addressing curriculum gaps in teacher preparation

FGD participants noted the absence of a dedicated subject on teaching beginning reading in teaching education curricula.

CID Chief: *"I suggest that CBSUA-CDE will include Teaching Reading in the curriculum of teacher education."*

Other participants supported this view, indicating that teacher preparation should more directly address beginning reading instruction.

4.3.4 Request for institution-led extension support

Participants identified three types of extension support that higher education institutions could provide: parent-focused reading courses, teacher capacity-building in assessment, and wellness-related activities for teachers.

a) Parent-oriented reading literacy courses

Parents of non-readers expressed the need for literacy training themselves, citing their inability to read as a barrier to helping their children. During the FGD, several parents were unable to write responses on meta cards or read evaluation forms, requiring assistance from the FGD assistant.

Parent (b): *"I do not know how to read; that is why I am asking CBSUA to teach me [sic] to read. This is the reason why I am unable to help my child with her reading activities."*

b) Teacher training on PISA-type assessments

Another request raised during the FGD concerned teacher capacity in developing PISA-like assessment items that affect assessment outcomes.

CID Chief: *"The teachers do not have the capacity to write PISA-like questions. This is one of the reasons why we have poor PISA results."*

CID Chief: *"I suggest CBSUA offer capacity building in the development of PISA-type tests in all learning areas."*

c) Teacher well-being and motivation activities

School officials described the challenges teachers face in handling non-readers and struggling readers, and emphasized the value of recognition and encouragement, noting that these factors can influence teaching performance, and, ultimately, learner outcomes. One principal shared:

Principal (b): *"Teachers are going through many challenges in teaching the non-readers and struggling readers, that is why, from time to time, we need to appreciate them, whether their achievement is big or small. They have to be encouraged, motivated, and inspired to teach every day."*

5. Discussion

By examining the lived experiences of learners and the perspectives of parents and education officials above, the study was able to recognize that reading difficulties are not attributable to a single factor but are instead shaped by an interaction of social, instructional, emotional, and systemic conditions. The

distinction between non-readers and struggling readers is particularly salient, as the latter group demonstrates wider and more complex challenges, indicating differing intervention needs rather than a uniform approach to reading remediation.

5.1 Understanding the Factors Shaping Non-Reading in Filipino

Based on the findings, it can be said that non-reading in Filipino is shaped by an interplay of social, emotional, and attitudinal factors in early reading development rather than by lack of interest alone. Across participant accounts, the unavailability of social resources at home emerged as a central root cause, particularly the absence of consistent parental or sibling support for reading development. Although many non-readers expressed awareness of the importance of reading and aspirations to improve, limited guidance at home constrained their ability to develop foundational skills. This aligns with literature emphasizing the critical role of parental involvement and home literacy practices in sustaining reading development beyond the primary level (Demir & Cetinkaya, 2024; Pamungkas et al., 2023; Rianto, 2021, as cited in Lestari et al., 2023; Rohimah, 2021; Stutzel, 2019, as cited in Castro, 2024; Timmons, 2019, as cited in Lestari et al., 2023).

The findings further reveal a mismatch between parental and teacher expectations regarding responsibility for reading support. While teachers assumed that reading drills would be reinforced at home, some parents – particularly those who were non-readers themselves – delegated this responsibility entirely to schools and, instead, equate providing material or financial support with academic involvement, creating a gap between their actions and the actual needs of their children. This disconnect reinforces evidence that material provision alone does not substitute for active literacy engagement (Ferolino, 2023; Johri, 2024). Consequently, non-readers often experienced frustration and diminished self-efficacy, despite their expressed desire to read proficiently.

Separation from parents, especially maternal, and difficulty in social adjustment further compounded reading difficulties by affecting learners' emotional stability and motivation. Parental absence, whether due to migration, family restructuring, or new caregiving arrangements, was associated with feelings of abandonment, low self-worth, and disengagement from learning. These emotional disruptions persisted in adolescence, limiting learners' readiness to engage with reading tasks. Such findings support prior research linking emotional security and attachment to sustained literacy engagement.

Experiences of mistreatment and discrimination at home and in school also contributed to non-reading by reinforcing negative self-perceptions. Social exclusion, bullying, and punitive responses to reading failure and the non-reading being seen as "*burdens*" in group settings (Castro, 2024) fostered isolation and withdrawal, thereby weakening learners' motivation and participation and stimulating internalized feelings of inferiority and self-blame. As Riesman (2008) notes, as cited in Regmi et al. (2023), repeated negative social interactions can significantly undermine learners' academic confidence and persistence.

At the same time, attitude toward reading functioned both as a root cause and a reinforcing outcome of these conditions. Non-readers commonly associated reading with frustration, failure, and punishment, leading to avoidance behaviors and deliberate preference for digital entertainment. With excessive screen use, opportunities for reading practice were then further displaced, reinforcing disengagement. Consistent with previous studies, negative reading attitudes—shaped by repeated failure and lack of support—pose a substantial barrier to literacy development (Layden et al., 2022, as cited in Al-Ali & Gaber, 2023; Al-Nofaie, 2018, as cited in Li et al., 2024; Mahfouz & Salama, 2021, as cited in Li et al., 2024; Hu, 2021, as cited in Li et al., 2024).

5.2 Understanding the Factors Sustaining Reading Difficulties Among Struggling Readers

Similarly, it appears that struggling readers experience reading difficulties due to a convergence of instructional, material, cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic factors. However, unlike non-readers, whose difficulties are rooted in early exposure and support, struggling readers typically progress through grade levels without mastering the reading competencies expected for their stage. Issues related to the quality of education emerged as a critical root cause, particularly the promotion of learners to junior high school without adequate reading proficiency in Filipino. Participants' accounts revealed that some students reached Grade 7 able to read only familiar, short words, reflecting gaps in instruction and insufficient mastery of foundational skills. This support concerns in the literature that grade promotion without competence mastery perpetuates academic difficulties across subjects.

The lack of essential requirements for learning further compounded these instructional gaps. Insufficient access to reading materials, writing supplies, and nutritious food undermined learners' capacity to engage meaningfully in reading tasks. While teachers attempted to mitigate these shortages, their efforts were unsustainable. Consistent with prior studies, material deprivation and hunger reduced learners' concentration, motivation, and persistence in reading activities (Rohmah & Imaniar, 2023). These conditions lowered morale and reinforced feelings of frustration among struggling readers, despite their expressed interest in improving.

Similar to non-readers, the unavailability of social resources at home also affected struggling readers, highlighting shared vulnerabilities across both groups. However, struggling readers faced additional challenges linked to the existence of cognitive impairments, such as intellectual disability (Gaber et al., 2023) and dyslexia (Schwarz et al., 2023). Notably, most learners, DepEd officials, and parents lacked awareness of these conditions, often interpreting symptoms as poor study habits or low ability. This absence of recognition stresses the limitations of uniform reading programs and points to the urgent need for differentiated and individualized interventions.

Mental and emotional disturbances further impeded reading development. Family conflict, neglect, and emotional instability diminished learners' readiness to engage in academic tasks, supporting evidence that emotional well-being is

foundational to literacy learning (Bronzo, n.d., as cited in Ferolino, 2023). In parallel, the culture of family interdependence—where learners are expected to contribute to household income—restricted time and energy for reading practice. Consistent with previous research, poverty-driven responsibilities limited opportunities for sustained literacy engagement (Castro, 2024; Jimenez, 2023).

Learners' attitude toward reading, as a recurring theme, were shaped through repeated experiences of difficulty, which in turn deepened their disengagement from reading. Struggling readers commonly viewed the task as burdensome or punitive, leading to avoidance behaviors and weak engagement. Such negative attitudes were closely associated with poor reading performance and reduced responsiveness to remedial programs (Rosano et al., 2025).

Overall, the 11 themes suggest that non-reader's and struggling readers' difficulties are both multidimensional and cumulative. This consideration is essential for strengthening the effectiveness and sustainability of the ARAL Reading Program, as emphasized in DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2025.

5.3 Proposed Courses of Action to Address Non-Reading and Struggling Reading

Building from the identified root causes of reading difficulties and lived realities of learners and other key stakeholders, the proposed courses of action foreground literacy intervention as a shared systemic responsibility rather than an isolated instructional task. These actions emphasize fortifying relational support for learners, expanding access to specialized expertise, realigning teacher education with current literacy demands, and sustaining institutional commitment through relevant extension programs. Collectively, these courses of action respond to both the structural and affective dimensions of reading difficulties, positioning literacy development more as a long-term collaborative process than a short-term remediation effort.

5.3.1 Enhancing connections for learning

Enhancing connections for learning emphasizes the establishment of sustained collaboration among learners, parents or guardians, teachers, school leaders, and community stakeholders to support reading development. The findings indicate that while schools recognize the value of shared responsibility—particularly through mechanisms such as the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), parental participation is often limited to providing material support, with minimal engagement in children's literacy practices. This narrow understanding of involvement constrains opportunities for meaningful home-school alignment.

Consistent with Ferolino (2023), the study underscores that literacy development is more effective when instructional support in school is reinforced by guided reading practices and communication at home. These findings suggest the need to reorient parents toward more active roles in literacy support and to institutionalize structures that facilitate ongoing dialogue between families and schools, positioning reading development as a collaborative and relational process.

5.3.2 Accessing experts and individuals with special training

The second course of action addresses the shortage of teachers equipped to teach beginning reading, particularly in Filipino. Data from the focus group discussions reveal that limited training opportunities and the absence of specialized coursework in teacher preparation programs have resulted in an insufficient pool of reading specialists, leaving many non-readers and struggling readers without adequate remediation. To mitigate this gap, DepEd officials proposed mobilizing alternative expertise, such as retired teachers and trained parents, to provide supplementary reading instruction. This approach reflects a pragmatic response to resource constraints while recognizing the value of accumulated professional experience. The data show that tapping external expertise can help address immediate instructional needs, especially in contexts where formal training pipelines are unable to meet demand, thereby ensuring more consistent support for learners requiring intensive reading intervention.

5.3.3 Updating of the teacher education curriculum

Updating the teacher education curriculum came up as a strategic, long-term response to the persistence of non-readers and struggling readers. Participants emphasized the need to institutionalize the teaching of beginning reading, particularly in Filipino, within pre-service teacher education programs. The lack of explicit preparation in reading pedagogy has contributed to the mismatch between teacher competencies and classroom realities. This evidence corresponds with Ferolino (2023) and Obiegbu (2018), who advocate for curriculum revisions that prioritize explicit instruction in reading processes rather than assuming reading skills will be acquired incidentally through language teaching. The results indicate that aligning teacher education curricula with the literacy demands of basic education is essential to building a sustainable workforce capable of addressing reading difficulties at their roots.

5.3.4 Implementing relevant and sustainable extension programs

This study identifies relevant and sustainable extension programs as essential mechanisms for addressing reading difficulties among non-readers and struggling readers beyond the formal classroom. The proposed initiatives respond to gaps identified at the home, school, and teacher levels and are anchored in both empirical findings and supporting literature. Three priority extension programs emerged: short-term reading courses for parents, PISA-like test capacity training for teachers, and seminars on self-worth, growth, and wellness for teachers.

a) Short-term courses in reading in Filipino [and English] for parents

Findings from the study reveal that limited home literacy support is partly attributed to parental illiteracy or low reading proficiency, a condition often unrecognized by schools. This constrains parents' capacity to assist children with reading activities, particularly among non-readers and struggling readers. Congruous with research on home literacy environments, parental involvement plays a critical role in children's reading development when parents possess the necessary literacy skills and confidence to engage in reading-related practices (Cairney & Munsie, 1995, Cakiroğlu & Kuruyer, 2012, Cetinkaya, 2024, Gay et al., 2021, Hemmerechts et al., 2017, Park, 2008, Senechal & LeFevre, 2002, and Wong et al., 2018, as cited in Demir & Cetinkaya, 2024). The proposed short-term reading

courses aim to equip parents with foundational reading skills and strategies, enabling them to participate more meaningfully in their children's literacy development. This intervention reframes parents not merely as providers of material support but as active partners in sustaining early reading gains.

b) PISA-like test capacity training for teachers

The findings indicate a misalignment between school-based reading assessments and the demands of international large-scale assessments, such as PISA, which emphasize comprehension, critical thinking, and application of knowledge. As revealed in the FGDs, many learners were unfamiliar with PISA-type tasks, contributing to their poor performance in recent assessments. Literature suggests that targeted teacher training has a significant positive impact on instructional quality and student achievement, particularly when professional development is aligned with assessment demands (Russo, 2024, as cited in Basma & Savage, 2023).

Hence, the proposed PISA-like test capacity training seeks to enhance teachers' assessment literacy and instructional strategies by familiarizing them with higher-order reading tasks. This initiative aligns with the government's continued investment in professional development programs aimed at improving teachers' pedagogical competence and reading-related instructional knowledge (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019, Garet et al., 2001, Murakami et al., 2016, and Rose, 2005, as cited in Basma & Savage, 2023). Ultimately, it addresses systemic issues related to assessment practices and supports the development of learners' functional and analytical reading skills.

c) Seminars on self-worth, growth, and wellness for teachers

The study also highlights teacher well-being as a critical yet often overlooked factor in addressing reading difficulties. FGD participants reported diminished motivation resulting from excessive workload, limited recognition, and sustained stress, particularly when managing large numbers of non-readers and struggling readers. Previous studies affirm that teacher motivation and psychological well-being are closely linked to instructional effectiveness, job satisfaction, and positive classroom environments (Fraser & Viac, 2020; Suhaimi et al., 2019, as cited in Ortega & Sumayo, 2024). The proposed seminar on self-worth, growth, and wellness then aims to support teachers' mental health, reinforce professional identity, and sustain motivation. By addressing emotional and psychological demands, this intervention recognizes teachers' well-being as integral to the success of reading programs and the long-term improvement of literacy outcomes.

5.4 Positioning Participant-Informed Reading Program Conceptual Models within the DepEd ARAL Framework

Figures 1 and 2 present the reading program conceptual models developed from the phenomenological analysis of non-readers' and struggling readers' lived experiences and the selected DepEd officials' and parents' perspectives. Rather than functioning as prescriptive frameworks, these models synthesize the meanings embedded in learners', parents', and education stakeholders' accounts, illustrating how reading difficulties are shaped by layered personal, social, and institutional conditions. In this sense, the models serve as interpretive lenses that

connect empirical findings to DepEd’s ARAL Program Framework.

5.4.1 Conceptual model for non-readers

The conceptual model for non-readers (Figure 1) reflects four interrelated root causes—unavailability of social resources, separation and difficulty in social adjustment, mistreatment and discrimination, and attitude toward reading—identified through inductive thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023). Interpreted phenomenologically, these themes reveal that non-reading is experienced not merely as an instructional gap but as a condition shaped by disrupted relationships, emotional vulnerability, and limited support structures.

The model highlights how learners’ accounts consistently positioned these factors as preceding formal reading instruction. This finding aligns with literature emphasizing that learners’ social and emotional contexts significantly influence early literacy development (Moore, 2017, as cited in Almulla et al., 2023). By visually organizing these root causes, the model underscores the importance of recognizing learners’ lived realities before their inclusion in uniform reading interventions, such as the ARAL Tutorial Program.

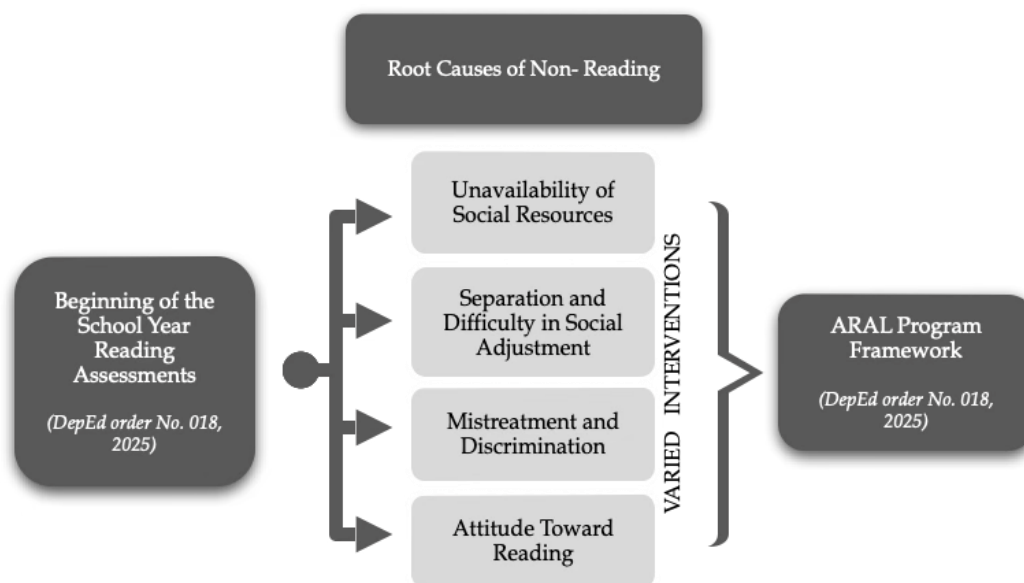


Figure 1: Conceptual model for non-readers

5.4.2 Conceptual model for struggling readers

On the other hand, Figure 2 presents the conceptual model for struggling readers, integrating seven root causes that emerged from participants’ narratives: issues on education quality, lack of essential learning requirements, unavailability of social resources, existence of developmental disabilities, mental and emotional disturbances, culture of family interdependence, and attitude toward reading. Compared with non-readers, struggling readers described more complex and persistent challenges that extend beyond initial literacy acquisition.

From a phenomenological perspective, this model illustrates how struggling reading is lived as an ongoing tension between academic expectations and competing socio-economic, emotional, and familial demands. The configuration of themes reflects participants' experiences of partial access to instruction that is constrained by systemic limitations and everyday responsibilities, supporting prior studies that highlight the interaction of structural and individual factors in sustained reading difficulty (Ferolino, 2023; Castro, 2024; Johri, 2024).

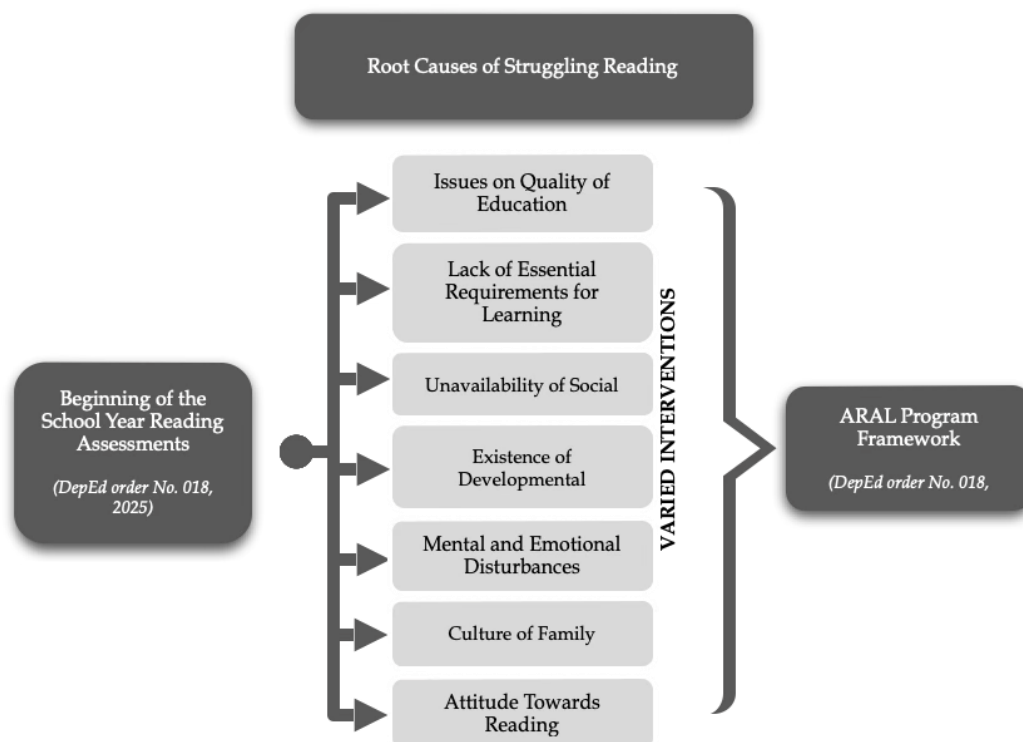
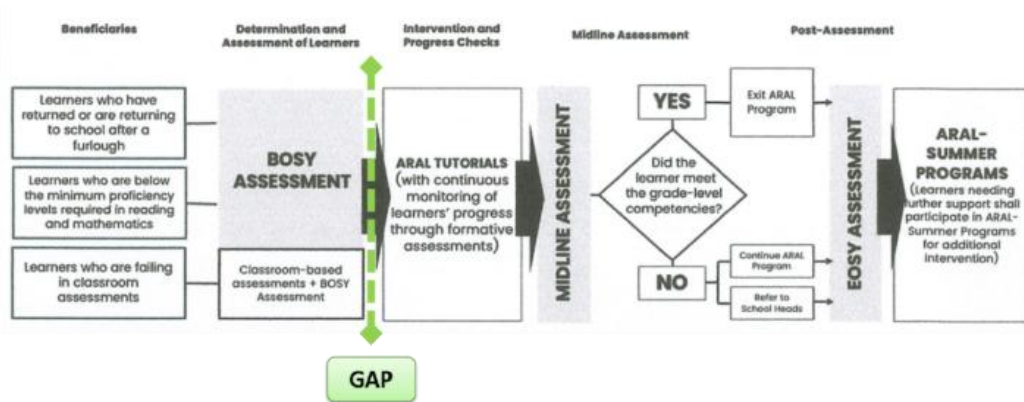


Figure 2: Conceptual model for struggling readers

5.4.3 Integrative interpretation of the models

Across both models, attitude toward reading and the unavailability of social resources emerged as shared experiential structures, suggesting that motivation and support consistently shape learners' engagement with reading regardless of proficiency level. At the same time, the models distinguish the qualitatively different conditions under which non-reading and struggling reading occur.

The broken arrow within the DepEd ARAL Program Framework below indicates the point at which phenomenologically grounded insights may inform assessment-to-intervention sequencing. This feature highlights a gap between assessment and intervention where learners' root experiences remain insufficiently addressed.



ARAL Program Framework

From DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2025

Consistent with Dewey and Thompson (2022), as cited in Fajrie & Purbasari (2024), the findings suggest that unexamined root conditions can function as persistent barriers to learning, potentially explaining the limited sustainability of prior reading initiatives. The findings highlight the importance of anchoring literacy interventions in the lived experiences of non-readers and struggling readers, as these root causes provide a critical basis for designing targeted and context-responsive courses of action. This is particularly salient given the sustained increase in reading difficulties since 2018 and the limited long-term impact of many DepEd reading initiatives implemented between 2002 and 2024.

The implementation of the ARAL Program Framework in 2025 offers a timely opportunity to integrate phenomenologically grounded, learner-centered interventions that address the social, emotional, instructional, and systemic conditions shaping reading difficulties in Filipino. By incorporating these root causes into program planning and delivery, DepEd can enhance the relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of reading interventions, ultimately supporting more meaningful and enduring improvements in learners' reading proficiency.

6. Conclusion

This study identified the root causes of non-reading and struggling reading in selected schools of Department of Education - Camarines Sur through the lived experiences of learners, and perceptions of selected DepEd officials, and parents; proposed evidence-based courses of action; and developed conceptual reading program models in Filipino. Non-readers exhibited four root causes: unavailability of social resources, separation and difficulty in social adjustment, mistreatment and discrimination, and attitude toward reading.

Meanwhile, struggling readers showed seven root causes: issues on education quality, lack of essential learning requirements, unavailability of social resources, existence of developmental disabilities, mental and emotional disturbances, culture of family interdependence, and attitudes toward reading. To address these concerns, the study identified key courses of action, including strengthening learning connections, accessing trained reading specialists, revising the teacher education curricula, and implementing sustainable extension programs for

parents and teachers. Phenomenologically, the conceptual models reiterate the limitations of a one-size-fits-all framework and, consequently, highlight the need for individualized, evidence-based, and context-responsive interventions, which are essential for improving literacy outcomes and preventing recurring reading difficulties among Filipino learners.

7. Limitations and Implications

Based on the limitations of the study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance future research and interventions in reading, particularly in Filipino. First, future studies may consider utilizing qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti, to systematically organize and code data, ensuring greater rigor and efficiency in data interpretation. Second, conducting the study in a wider range of DepEd high schools across Camarines Sur – or even at the national level – would increase the representativeness of the findings and allow for broader generalizations. Third, given the limited availability of literature focused specifically on reading in Filipino, future researchers are encouraged to develop and expand local studies to provide contextually relevant insights that complement international literature. Lastly, future research may focus on designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that directly address the identified root causes of non-reading and struggling reading, with particular emphasis on Filipino language instruction, home literacy support, and individualized learning approaches. These efforts will help ensure that reading programs are evidence-based, sustainable, and tailored to learners' specific needs.

8. Conflict of Interest

The author declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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