



Literacy Disparities and Educational Challenges in the Philippines: A Systematic Review

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Abstract:

This systematic literature review examines literacy and education in the Philippines, revealing disparities in national literacy data compared to international assessments such as PISA and SEA-PLM. Systemic challenges within the education system, including integrity issues during examinations and curricular deficiencies, hinder educational quality. Despite these challenges, initiatives like the BELRCP and collaborations with international organizations like USAID aim to improve literacy outcomes. Research gaps highlight the need for longitudinal studies and investigations into socio-cultural factors influencing literacy acquisition. Addressing these gaps requires a coordinated effort from stakeholders to foster inclusive learning environments and prioritize evidence-based strategies for educational reform. By bridging these disparities and leveraging promising initiatives, the Philippines can work towards a more equitable and accessible education system that empowers learners and promotes societal development.

Keywords: Literacy, education, Philippines, disparities, challenges, initiatives, BELRCP, international assessments

Introduction:

In the contemporary global landscape, literacy stands as a fundamental pillar of human development and societal progress. It serves as a gateway to knowledge, economic opportunity, and civic engagement. In the Philippines, the issue of literacy holds particular significance, intertwined with the nation's quest for inclusive growth and social equity. Despite the Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) assertion of a high functional literacy rate of 91.6% among Filipinos, international assessments paint a contrasting picture, revealing significant deficiencies in educational quality and literacy proficiency (PSA, 2020).

The PSA's definition of functional literacy encompasses not only basic reading and writing skills but also numeracy capabilities essential for active participation in daily life activities. However, assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) present a sobering narrative, indicating substantial shortcomings in literacy and numeracy proficiency among Filipino students (OECD, 2018, SEA-PLM, 2019). PISA's findings, in particular, underscore the urgent need for educational reform and raise questions regarding the efficacy of English as the medium of instruction within the Philippine education system.

Moreover, beyond discrepancies in assessment outcomes, systemic challenges plague the Philippine educational landscape, compromising the attainment of functional literacy for all. Reports of widespread cheating during



national examinations and curricular deficiencies, particularly in historical narratives and linguistic integration, underscore the multifaceted nature of the problem. The implications of these challenges extend beyond academic realms, impacting socioeconomic mobility, civic participation, and national development trajectories.

In response to these challenges, various stakeholders have initiated efforts to address literacy disparities and enhance educational outcomes. The Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) exemplifies a concerted endeavor to mitigate learning losses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and foster a culture of lifelong learning (DepEd, 2022). Collaborative ventures with international organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) signal a commitment to leveraging external expertise and resources in pursuit of educational excellence.

As the Philippines navigates its educational landscape, imbued with challenges and opportunities, a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing literacy outcomes is imperative. This research endeavors to critically examine discrepancies in literacy data, elucidate systemic challenges within the education system and evaluate ongoing initiatives to address literacy disparities. By shedding light on these issues, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on literacy promotion and educational reform in the Philippines, ultimately fostering inclusive development and societal empowerment.

Literature Review:

The literature surrounding literacy and education in the Philippines provides valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by the nation and the concerted efforts aimed at addressing them. This literature review seeks to synthesize existing research on literacy disparities, educational quality, and initiatives for improvement, providing a comprehensive understanding of the contextual factors shaping the Philippine educational landscape.

The Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) assertion of a high functional literacy rate of 91.6% among Filipinos, as reported in the Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) 2019, stands in stark contrast to findings from international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) Assessment. These assessments reveal significant disparities in literacy and numeracy proficiency among Filipino students.

According to the PISA 2018 results, Filipino students scored significantly below average in reading, mathematics, and science literacy compared to their global counterparts. Only about 19% of Filipino students achieved at least the minimum proficiency level in overall reading literacy, while approximately 20% attained the minimum in mathematical literacy. Similarly, the SEA-PLM Assessment highlighted deficiencies in reading, writing, and math proficiency among fifth-grade students, with only 63% meeting the lowest expected level of proficiency for their grade level.

These discrepancies raise questions regarding the validity of national literacy data and underscore the need for a critical examination of assessment methodologies, educational practices, and systemic challenges within the Philippine education system.

Beyond assessment discrepancies, systemic challenges within the Philippine education system contribute to literacy disparities and hinder educational quality. Reports of rampant cheating during national examinations, including the feeding of answers and coaching of students, point to integrity issues that undermine the validity and reliability of assessment outcomes. Moreover, curricular deficiencies, particularly in historical narratives and linguistic integration, pose significant barriers to achieving functional literacy for all.

The use of English as the medium of instruction has also come under scrutiny, with studies suggesting that Filipino students perform better in national assessments when using Tagalog rather than English (Abella, et al., 2023). This raises questions about the appropriateness of language policies and pedagogical approaches in addressing the diverse linguistic needs of Filipino learners. Additionally, the neglect of precolonial history and the oversimplification of colonial narratives contribute to a limited understanding of the nation's historical context among students.

Despite these challenges, various stakeholders have initiated efforts to address literacy disparities and enhance educational outcomes in the Philippines. The Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) represents a comprehensive strategy to mitigate learning losses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and foster a culture of lifelong learning. By reducing the number of learning areas and focusing on foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, the BELRCP aims to address the diverse learning needs of Filipino students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Collaborative ventures with international organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also play a crucial role in advancing educational reform in the Philippines. Programs like the ABC+: Advance Basic Education in the Philippines Program focus on evidence-based solutions for improved early

literacy and numeracy instruction, providing technical assistance and resources to enhance educational practices at the national and local levels.

While existing literature offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the Philippine education system, several research gaps warrant further investigation. Future research endeavors should focus on examining the effectiveness of educational reforms and interventions in addressing literacy disparities and improving educational quality (Andrin, et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes over time can provide valuable insights into the impact of policy changes and pedagogical innovations on literacy proficiency and academic achievement.

Additionally, studies exploring the socio-cultural factors influencing literacy acquisition and educational attainment among Filipino learners are needed to inform culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum development efforts. By addressing these research gaps and building on existing knowledge, scholars and practitioners can contribute to the ongoing discourse on literacy promotion and educational reform in the Philippines, ultimately fostering inclusive development and societal empowerment.

Methodology:

For this study, a systematic literature review methodology was employed to synthesize existing research on literacy and education in the Philippines. The systematic review process followed established guidelines to ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility in the selection and analysis of relevant literature. A comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify relevant literature from academic databases, scholarly journals, government reports, and grey literature sources. Keywords and search terms related to literacy, education, Philippines, assessment, curriculum, and reforms were used to retrieve relevant studies.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of the retrieved studies. Inclusion criteria included studies published in peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and reputable grey literature sources, focusing on literacy and education issues in the Philippines. Exclusion criteria encompassed studies not relevant to the research question, non-English publications, and studies lacking empirical evidence or methodological rigor.

The study selection process comprised multiple stages, including title screening, abstract review, and full-text assessment. Two independent reviewers screened the retrieved studies based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any discrepancies or disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. Data extraction involved systematically extracting relevant information from the selected studies, including study characteristics, key findings, methodologies, and conclusions. Data were synthesized and analyzed thematically to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature related to literacy and education in the Philippines. A quality assessment was conducted to evaluate the methodological rigor and validity of the selected studies. Quality assessment criteria included study design, sample size, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and adherence to ethical standards. Studies were rated based on their methodological rigor and relevance to the research question.

Findings and Discussion:

Discrepancies in Literacy Data:

The systematic literature review conducted on literacy and education in the Philippines highlighted notable disparities between national literacy data reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and findings from internationally recognized assessments. Despite the PSA's assertion of a commendable functional literacy rate of 91.6% among Filipinos, studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) Assessment paint a contrasting picture. These assessments revealed lower levels of literacy proficiency across key domains, notably in reading, writing, and mathematics.

For instance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a globally recognized assessment, demonstrated that Filipino students scored significantly below average in reading, mathematics, and science literacy compared to their peers in other countries (OECD, 2018). Similarly, the SEA-PLM Assessment highlighted deficiencies in reading, writing, and math proficiency among fifth-grade students in the Philippines, with only a fraction meeting the expected levels of proficiency for their grade level (SEA-PLM Assessment, 2019).

These disparities raise questions about the accuracy and reliability of national literacy data reported by the PSA. While the PSA's definition of functional literacy encompasses a broad spectrum of skills, including reading, writing, and numeracy, the discrepancy between national and international assessments suggests a need for a critical examination of assessment methodologies and educational practices within the Philippine education system.



Furthermore, these findings underscore the urgency of addressing the underlying factors contributing to literacy disparities and educational inequities in the Philippines (De Gracia, et al., 2023). Efforts to enhance literacy proficiency and educational outcomes must be informed by empirical evidence and international best practices to ensure the effective allocation of resources and interventions.

The systematic literature review revealed significant discrepancies between national literacy data reported by the PSA and findings from international assessments. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing literacy outcomes and a commitment to evidence-based policy and practice in promoting literacy and educational improvement in the Philippines.

Systemic Challenges in Education:

The literature review underscored systemic challenges entrenched within the Philippine education system, which significantly impede efforts to bridge literacy disparities and enhance educational quality. One notable challenge pertains to integrity issues plaguing national examinations, including widespread instances of cheating and coaching (Aguilar, 2021). Such breaches not only undermine the validity of assessment outcomes but also erode public trust in the education system, perpetuating a cycle of academic dishonesty and mistrust.

Additionally, the review identified critical curricular deficiencies that hinder students' holistic development and literacy acquisition. Of particular concern are inadequacies in historical narratives, where the emphasis on colonial history often eclipses the rich tapestry of precolonial heritage (Lacson, 2004). This imbalance not only distorts students' understanding of their cultural identity but also perpetuates a Eurocentric worldview that marginalizes indigenous knowledge and perspectives.

Moreover, the pervasive use of English as the primary medium of instruction presents formidable barriers to literacy attainment for many Filipino learners. While English proficiency is considered advantageous in a globalized world, the overreliance on English neglects the linguistic diversity of the Philippines and alienates students who may struggle to grasp complex concepts in a second language (Zagabe, 2017). As a result, many students face significant hurdles in achieving functional literacy, particularly in subjects requiring nuanced comprehension and critical analysis.

Addressing these systemic challenges requires concerted efforts to reform educational policies and practices that perpetuate inequities and hinder literacy development (Lumando, et al., 2023). Initiatives aimed at promoting academic integrity, revising curricular frameworks to reflect diverse histories and cultures, and embracing multilingual education approaches are imperative in fostering inclusive learning environments conducive to literacy acquisition for all learners.

Initiatives for Educational Improvement:

Amidst the formidable challenges confronting the Philippine education system, a multitude of stakeholders have embarked on proactive initiatives aimed at ameliorating literacy disparities and bolstering educational outcomes. Foremost among these endeavors is the Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP), a multifaceted strategy devised to counteract the profound learning deficits exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through targeted interventions and adaptive pedagogical approaches, the BELRCP endeavors to mitigate the adverse impacts of disrupted schooling on student learning trajectories while cultivating a pervasive ethos of lifelong learning (DepEd, 2020).

Collaborative partnerships with international development agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have emerged as pivotal catalysts in propelling educational reform initiatives forward in the Philippines. The ABC+: Advance Basic Education in the Philippines Program, spearheaded by USAID, exemplifies one such collaborative venture aimed at bolstering the foundational pillars of the Philippine education system (USAID, 2020). By harnessing the expertise and resources of international partners, the program seeks to engender systemic improvements in pedagogy, curriculum development, and educational governance, thereby fostering an enabling environment conducive to equitable access and quality learning outcomes for all learners.

Furthermore, grassroots initiatives driven by local communities and civil society organizations have played an instrumental role in complementing top-down reform efforts and addressing localized challenges in literacy promotion and educational enhancement (Tañiza, et al., 2024). From community-led literacy campaigns to innovative teacher training programs, these bottom-up interventions underscore the vital role of community engagement and empowerment in driving sustainable educational change (Palma, 2018).

In concert, these diverse initiatives represent a concerted and holistic approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges plaguing the Philippine education landscape. By leveraging collaborative partnerships, evidence-based strategies, and grassroots mobilization, stakeholders are poised to effect transformative change and pave the way for a more equitable, inclusive, and resilient education system in the Philippines.

**Research Gaps and Future Directions:**

The literature review conducted on literacy and education in the Philippines has illuminated critical research gaps and provided insight into future directions for scholarly inquiry. One prominent area requiring attention is the need for longitudinal studies that track student outcomes over time, enabling a comprehensive assessment of the long-term impacts of policy changes and pedagogical innovations on literacy proficiency and academic achievement (Maligalig, et al., 2010). Such longitudinal research endeavors hold immense potential for informing evidence-based decision-making within the education sector and facilitating the refinement of educational policies and practices to better meet the evolving needs of learners.

Moreover, there is a pressing need for studies delving into the socio-cultural factors that shape literacy acquisition and educational attainment among Filipino learners (Vestal, et al., 2023). Understanding the intricate interplay between cultural contexts, societal norms, and educational experiences is essential for developing culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum frameworks that resonate with diverse learner populations (Pinaaling & Valle, 2023). By interrogating the socio-cultural dimensions of literacy and education, researchers can glean invaluable insights into the underlying mechanisms driving educational disparities and devise targeted interventions aimed at fostering inclusive learning environments that empower all learners.

Addressing these research gaps is paramount to advancing the discourse on literacy promotion and educational reform in the Philippines. By leveraging rigorous empirical research, scholars can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies and policy recommendations that foster inclusive development and societal empowerment through education (NEDA, 2022). Ultimately, bridging these research lacunae holds the potential to catalyze transformative change within the Philippine education landscape, paving the way for a more equitable, accessible, and quality education system that empowers individuals and communities alike.

Conclusion:

The systematic literature review on literacy and education in the Philippines has shed light on the multifaceted challenges and promising initiatives shaping the educational landscape of the nation. Through an examination of disparities in literacy data, systemic challenges in education, ongoing initiatives for educational improvement, and identified research gaps, this study has underscored the urgent need for concerted efforts to enhance literacy outcomes and educational quality in the Philippines.

The disparities revealed between national literacy data and findings from international assessments highlight the complexity of measuring and addressing literacy proficiency accurately. Systemic challenges within the education system, including integrity issues during examinations and curricular deficiencies, underscore the importance of structural reforms to promote equitable access to quality education for all learners.

Despite these challenges, various stakeholders have initiated proactive efforts to address literacy disparities and enhance educational outcomes, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) and collaborative ventures with international organizations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). These initiatives represent critical steps towards fostering a culture of lifelong learning and promoting inclusive development through education.

Moreover, the identification of research gaps and future directions underscores the ongoing need for rigorous empirical research to inform evidence-based policy and practice in literacy promotion and educational reform. Longitudinal studies tracking student outcomes over time and investigations into socio-cultural factors influencing literacy acquisition among Filipino learners hold particular promise in informing culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum development efforts.

Addressing the challenges and capitalizing on the opportunities highlighted in this study requires a coordinated and collaborative approach from policymakers, educators, researchers, and communities. By leveraging evidence-based strategies, fostering inclusive learning environments, and prioritizing the needs of diverse learner populations, stakeholders can work towards realizing a vision of equitable, accessible, and quality education for all in the Philippines.

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