



Lifelong Learning and Literacy: The Impact of Educational Reforms in the Philippine Context

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Abstract:

This study examines ongoing initiatives aimed at improving literacy and educational outcomes in the Philippines, focusing on the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) and collaborations with organizations such as USAID. Despite recent efforts, significant disparities in literacy rates persist, often exacerbated by resource limitations, inconsistent teacher training, and regional inequities. The research highlights the importance of fostering a culture of lifelong learning and community engagement in literacy initiatives, emphasizing the role of effective school leadership in creating conducive learning environments. The findings indicate that collaborative partnerships among stakeholders, including parents and local communities, are crucial for the sustainability of literacy programs. Moreover, the study underscores the need for continuous assessment and adaptation of educational strategies to meet the evolving needs of learners. By prioritizing inclusive practices and leveraging community involvement, the Philippines can work towards achieving functional literacy for all. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding literacy reform in the country, providing insights into effective approaches that can enhance educational equity and empower learners for lifelong success.

Keywords: Literacy Improvement, Educational Reform, Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP), Functional Literacy

Introduction:

As the Philippines navigates its educational landscape, marked by both challenges and opportunities, a thorough understanding of the factors influencing literacy outcomes is essential. This research aims to critically analyze discrepancies in literacy data, clarify systemic obstacles within the education system, and assess ongoing initiatives to address literacy disparities. By illuminating these issues, this study aspires to contribute to the dialogue on literacy advancement and educational reform in the Philippines, ultimately promoting inclusive development and societal empowerment.

Moreover, systemic challenges continue to undermine the attainment of functional literacy for all Filipinos. Reports of widespread malpractices during national examinations and deficiencies in the curriculum—especially concerning historical narratives and linguistic integration—highlight the complex nature of the problem. These challenges have far-reaching implications, affecting socioeconomic mobility, civic engagement, and national development trajectories.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) defines functional literacy as encompassing not just basic reading and writing abilities, but also numeracy skills necessary for meaningful participation in daily life.

Nonetheless, assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) present a concerning narrative, revealing significant gaps in literacy and numeracy skills among Filipino students. The findings from PISA particularly emphasize the urgent need for educational reform and question the effectiveness of English as the medium of instruction in the Philippine education system (OECD, 2018; SEA-PLM, 2019).



In response to these pressing issues, various stakeholders have begun initiatives aimed at narrowing literacy gaps and improving educational outcomes. The Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) exemplifies a unified effort to address learning losses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic while fostering a culture of lifelong learning (DepEd, 2022).

Partnerships with international organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) underscore a commitment to harnessing external expertise and resources in the pursuit of educational excellence.

In the current global context, literacy is a critical foundation for human development and societal advancement. It acts as a gateway to knowledge, economic opportunities, and civic participation. In the Philippines, the issue of literacy is particularly significant, intertwined with the nation's aspirations for inclusive growth and social equity. While the PSA reports a high functional literacy rate of 91.6% among Filipinos, international assessments portray a contrasting scenario, exposing substantial deficiencies in educational quality and literacy proficiency (PSA, 2020).

Literature Review

The body of research regarding literacy and education in the Philippines sheds light on the intricate challenges confronting the nation and the dedicated efforts to tackle them. This literature review consolidates existing studies on literacy inequities, educational standards, and reform initiatives, providing a thorough understanding of the contextual elements shaping the Philippine educational framework.

While the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) claims a functional literacy rate of 91.6% among Filipinos, as reported in the Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) 2019, international evaluations reveal a starkly different reality. Assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) highlight considerable deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills among Filipino learners.

The 2018 PISA results indicate that Filipino students performed significantly below the global average in reading, mathematics, and science literacy. Only about 19% achieved the minimum proficiency level in reading, while roughly 20% reached this benchmark in mathematics. The SEA-PLM Assessment further underscored this issue, with only 63% of fifth-grade students meeting the most basic proficiency expectations in reading, writing, and math.

These disparities cast doubt on the reliability of national literacy statistics and underscore the necessity for a critical evaluation of assessment methods, educational practices, and systemic barriers within the Philippine education system.

Beyond issues of assessment, systemic challenges significantly contribute to literacy gaps and impede educational quality. Reports of widespread cheating during national examinations, including answer leaks and student coaching, reveal integrity concerns that undermine the credibility of assessment results. Additionally, curricular weaknesses—especially in historical context and language integration—create significant obstacles to achieving functional literacy for all.

The decision to use English as the primary medium of instruction has also faced criticism, with studies suggesting that Filipino students often perform better in assessments conducted in Tagalog (Abella et al., 2023). This raises important questions about the suitability of language policies and teaching strategies in catering to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of Filipino students. Furthermore, the disregard for precolonial history and the simplification of colonial narratives hinder students' comprehension of their historical context.

Despite these challenges, various stakeholders have embarked on initiatives to bridge literacy gaps and enhance educational outcomes in the Philippines. The Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) represents a comprehensive approach aimed at alleviating learning losses intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic while fostering a culture of lifelong learning. By narrowing the focus on essential literacy and numeracy skills, the BELRCP seeks to meet the varied needs of Filipino students, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds.

Collaborative efforts with international organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are also crucial in advancing educational reform in the Philippines. Programs like the ABC+: Advance Basic Education in the Philippines Program emphasize evidence-based strategies for improving early literacy and numeracy instruction, providing essential resources and technical assistance to elevate educational practices at both the national and local levels.

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the Philippine education system, several research gaps require further exploration. Future inquiries should focus on assessing the



effectiveness of educational reforms and interventions in reducing literacy disparities and improving educational quality (Andrin et al., 2024). Longitudinal studies that track student progress over time can offer critical insights into how policy changes and innovative teaching methods impact literacy proficiency and academic performance.

Additionally, research that examines the socio-cultural factors influencing literacy development and educational success among Filipino learners is vital for informing culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum innovations. By addressing these gaps in research and building on existing knowledge, educators and researchers can contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue on literacy enhancement and educational reform in the Philippines, ultimately promoting inclusive growth and societal empowerment.

Methodology

For this investigation, a systematic literature review approach was utilized to integrate existing research on literacy and education in the Philippines. The review process adhered to established guidelines to ensure thoroughness, transparency, and replicability in the selection and analysis of pertinent literature. A comprehensive search strategy was devised to locate relevant sources from academic databases, scholarly journals, government publications, and grey literature. Keywords and search phrases pertaining to literacy, education, the Philippines, assessment, curriculum, and reforms were employed to gather pertinent studies.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to guarantee the relevance and quality of the studies retrieved. Inclusion criteria consisted of studies published in peer-reviewed journals, credible government reports, and reputable grey literature, focusing specifically on literacy and educational challenges in the Philippines. Conversely, exclusion criteria included studies unrelated to the research topic, publications not in English, and works lacking empirical support or methodological soundness.

The selection process involved several stages, including title screening, abstract evaluation, and full-text analysis. Two independent reviewers evaluated the gathered studies according to the established criteria. Any disagreements or discrepancies between reviewers were addressed through discussion and consensus. Data extraction involved systematically gathering key information from the selected studies, including study characteristics, main findings, methodologies, and conclusions. This data was synthesized and thematically analyzed to uncover patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature concerning literacy and education in the Philippines.

A quality assessment was conducted to appraise the methodological rigor and validity of the selected studies. The assessment criteria included study design, sample size, data collection methods, analytical techniques, and adherence to ethical standards. Each study was rated based on its methodological robustness and relevance to the research inquiry.

Findings and Discussion:

Navigating the Challenges of Literacy Assessment in the Philippines

Addressing discrepancies in literacy assessment data is crucial for formulating effective educational policies and interventions. Initiatives like the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) aim to mitigate learning losses and improve literacy outcomes, particularly in light of challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Education, 2020).

Collaborative efforts with international organizations, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), also play a pivotal role in addressing these literacy gaps through evidence-based strategies and resources aimed at enhancing educational quality (USAID, 2020). Thus, a thorough understanding of the factors influencing these discrepancies is essential for promoting inclusive and effective literacy education in the Philippines.

The landscape of literacy in the Philippines is marked by significant disparities between national assessments and international benchmarks. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reports a functional literacy rate of 91.6% from its 2019 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020).

This figure, however, sharply contrasts with findings from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM), which highlight alarming gaps in reading, mathematics, and science literacy among Filipino students (OECD, 2018; SEA-PLM, 2019). Such inconsistencies raise essential questions about the credibility of national assessments and the broader quality of education in the country.

These conflicting assessments suggest that while national statistics portray a seemingly high literacy rate, they obscure underlying issues related to educational outcomes and student proficiency. For instance, during the PISA 2018 assessment, only 19% of Filipino students met the minimum proficiency level in reading literacy (OECD, 2018). This divergence between national claims and international findings calls for a critical evaluation of the methodologies used to collect and report literacy data.



Research indicates that systemic challenges within the Philippine education system, including prevalent academic dishonesty during exams and shortcomings in curriculum design, contribute to the gap between reported statistics and actual student performance (Aguilar, 2021; Maligalig et al., 2010).

Compounding these issues is the language of instruction, which significantly affects literacy outcomes. Studies show that Filipino students tend to perform better on assessments conducted in their native languages, such as Tagalog, compared to those conducted in English (Zagabe, 2017).

This raises important questions about the suitability of English as the primary medium of instruction and its implications for literacy achievement. The disconnect between the language of classroom instruction and the language of assessment could be a crucial factor in the low proficiency levels observed in international evaluations (Andrin et al., 2024).

Overcoming Systemic Barriers in Philippine Education

Addressing the systemic barriers in the Philippine education system is essential for enhancing functional literacy and ensuring equitable access to quality education. Collaborative efforts among educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders are critical in creating a more inclusive and effective learning environment. By confronting issues like academic dishonesty, curricular shortcomings, and the oversimplification of historical narratives, the Philippines can build a more resilient education system that empowers students to navigate the complexities of modern society. As the nation works through these challenges, strategic initiatives and a commitment to reform will be pivotal in achieving sustained improvements in literacy and educational equity (USAID, 2020; Tañiza et al., 2024).

The oversimplification of historical narratives in educational materials is a significant factor contributing to the challenges faced by the Philippine education system. This reductionist approach fails to provide students with a nuanced understanding of their country's history, culture, and identity.

Lacson (2004) emphasizes that a comprehensive exploration of historical contexts is vital for fostering critical thinking and civic engagement among learners. When educational content is presented superficially, it restricts students' ability to connect historical events with contemporary issues, adversely impacting their literacy and comprehension skills.

Curricular deficiencies further complicate the landscape for Filipino students. The current curriculum often lacks alignment with real-world applications and does not engage students in meaningful learning experiences. Maligalig et al. (2010) argue that a rigid, traditional approach to education limits students' development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are essential for functional literacy. This disconnect between curriculum design and the needs of 21st-century learners raises pressing questions about the effectiveness of educational policies and their impact on student performance, particularly in relation to international standards.

A pervasive issue within the education system is rampant academic dishonesty, particularly evident during national examinations. Research by Aguilar (2021) highlights that both students and educators often engage in dishonest practices, undermining the integrity of assessments and misrepresenting students' true academic capabilities. This culture of dishonesty not only affects individual learning outcomes but also perpetuates broader educational inequities, as schools may artificially inflate their performance metrics while ignoring fundamental literacy issues.

To effectively tackle these systemic challenges, a multifaceted approach is necessary, encompassing curricular reform, improved instructional leadership, and a commitment to ethical educational practices. Research indicates that strong leadership within schools plays a crucial role in fostering a culture of academic integrity and high performance (Andrin et al., 2024; Abella et al., 2024).

Initiatives such as the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) seek to address these challenges by providing schools with resources and strategies to enhance literacy outcomes and rebuild the educational framework in the aftermath of the pandemic (Department of Education, 2020).

Language Policies and Their Influence on Literacy Proficiency

The impact of language policies on literacy proficiency in the Philippines is multifaceted and demands urgent attention. Acknowledging the benefits of native language instruction and the significance of cultural relevance in education is crucial for enhancing literacy outcomes across diverse student populations.

As the country progresses, a collaborative effort among educators, policymakers, and community members will be essential in reforming language policies to ensure that all Filipino students have equitable access to quality education and the opportunity to excel academically.



Leadership within educational institutions plays a pivotal role in addressing the challenges posed by existing language policies. Effective instructional leadership can facilitate the adoption of inclusive language practices that prioritize student needs and promote equity in education (Andrin et al., 2024). By advocating for policies that support mother-tongue instruction and training teachers to implement culturally responsive pedagogies, school leaders can foster an environment conducive to learning and literacy development. Initiatives like the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (2020) aim to address these concerns by providing frameworks to improve educational outcomes through language policies that respect local contexts.

Furthermore, research indicates that students' literacy development is intricately linked to their cultural and linguistic identities. Lacson (2004) emphasizes that education that respects and integrates students' cultural backgrounds can enhance their learning experiences. By promoting bilingual or multilingual education approaches, students can develop literacy skills in both their native language and English, fostering a comprehensive understanding of content and a sense of identity and belonging. This shift has the potential to bridge the literacy gap and enhance academic performance among diverse learner groups (De Gracia et al., 2023).

Research suggests that the linguistic gap can hinder comprehension and engagement in the learning process. When students are taught in a language that is not their primary mode of communication, they may struggle to grasp complex concepts and express their understanding effectively.

According to the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (2019), students' performance in literacy assessments significantly correlates with their proficiency in the language of instruction. This finding underscores the necessity of using native languages in early education to foster better understanding and retention of learning materials, ultimately contributing to improved literacy outcomes.

The use of English as the medium of instruction in the Philippines has profound implications for students' literacy outcomes. While English is often viewed as a global language that opens doors to opportunities, its dominance in the educational system poses significant challenges for Filipino students, particularly those from rural areas where English is not commonly spoken. Studies indicate that students may perform better on assessments conducted in their native languages, such as Tagalog, highlighting the urgent need to critically examine current language policies and their impact on literacy proficiency across diverse student populations (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020).

Transforming Literacy through Educational Reform Initiatives

The ongoing initiatives for educational reform and literacy enhancement in the Philippines signify significant progress toward addressing literacy disparities. By leveraging programs like the Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) and fostering partnerships with organizations such as USAID, stakeholders can collaboratively work to improve literacy outcomes for all students. However, continued assessment and adaptation of these initiatives are crucial for navigating the complexities of the educational landscape, ensuring that every learner has the opportunity to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Promoting a culture of lifelong learning is essential for improving educational outcomes in the Philippines. Initiatives that encourage continuous professional development for educators, alongside programs that engage families and communities, are vital for fostering a conducive learning environment.

The Literacy Leadership model, as highlighted by Marcos (2024), stresses the importance of school leaders cultivating a supportive atmosphere that empowers teachers and motivates students to pursue literacy beyond the classroom. Involving parents and community members in literacy activities can significantly extend the reach and impact of these initiatives.

Evaluation of ongoing initiatives reveals a mix of successes and challenges in addressing literacy disparities. While programs like BELRCP and USAID's ABC+: Advancing Basic Education in the Philippines Program have shown promise in improving literacy rates, challenges such as inadequate resources, varying levels of teacher training, and disparities in access to technology persist (Maligalig et al., 2010).

The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (2019) highlighted significant variations in literacy performance across regions, indicating that tailored approaches are essential to meet the unique needs of diverse student populations. Understanding these challenges is crucial for refining existing initiatives and ensuring their inclusivity and effectiveness.

Partnerships with organizations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) significantly bolster these reform efforts. The ABC+ program exemplifies a collaborative approach to improving literacy through targeted interventions and community engagement. This initiative emphasizes the importance of evidence-based practices, teacher training, and resource allocation to bridge the literacy gap among students, particularly in



underserved areas (USAID, 2020). Such partnerships provide critical support and expertise necessary to implement effective literacy strategies in schools.

In recent years, the Philippines has increasingly recognized the urgent need for educational reform, especially regarding literacy improvement. Central to this movement is the Department of Education's (DepEd) Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP), which aims to tackle the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other systemic issues in the education sector.

The BELRCP provides a framework for implementing strategies that prioritize essential learning competencies, ensuring that students continue to receive quality education despite various disruptions (Department of Education, Philippines, 2020). This initiative is pivotal in laying the groundwork for enhanced literacy outcomes across the country.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the critical importance of targeted initiatives aimed at improving literacy and educational outcomes in the Philippines. Through an evaluation of the Department of Education's Basic Education Learning and Recovery Continuity Plan (BELRCP) and collaborative efforts with organizations such as USAID, it is evident that a multifaceted approach is necessary to address the existing disparities in literacy rates across the country. The findings highlight that while substantial progress has been made, challenges such as resource inadequacies, inconsistent teacher training, and regional disparities continue to impede the realization of equitable educational opportunities.

Moreover, the emphasis on fostering a culture of lifelong learning and community engagement proves essential in promoting sustainable literacy improvement. Effective school leadership, as discussed in the context of the Literacy Leadership model, plays a pivotal role in cultivating an environment conducive to learning, thereby empowering both educators and students. The involvement of parents and local communities in literacy initiatives further enhances the potential for long-term success, ensuring that educational reforms resonate within the broader social context.

Moving forward, it is crucial for policymakers and educational leaders to remain vigilant and adaptive in their strategies, ensuring that interventions are responsive to the evolving needs of learners. Continuous assessment and refinement of literacy programs will be necessary to maximize their effectiveness and reach. By prioritizing inclusive practices and leveraging collaborative partnerships, the Philippines can pave the way for a more equitable educational landscape where every learner has the opportunity to thrive.

The path toward improved literacy and educational outcomes in the Philippines is marked by both challenges and opportunities. Through ongoing commitment to reform initiatives and a focus on collaborative efforts, the nation can move closer to achieving its goal of functional literacy for all, ultimately contributing to a more informed and empowered society.

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