# Teachers' challenges, capabilities, and needs in teaching learners with reading difficulties

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**Abstract:** This study aims to understand the teachers' challenges, capabilities, and resources in teaching learners with reading difficulties. It utilized a qualitative descriptive approach and data were collected using single focus group discussion. A descriptive thematic approach was employed following the method of Braun & Clark to analyze the data and describe the experiences of the informants. Participants of this study are 17 teachers from Junior High School in one public school in the City Schools Division of Dasmariñas who encountered students with reading difficulties in the conduct of their classes during the first quarter of school year 2022-2023. Findings revealed that in terms of challenges, the following themes emerged 1) Low participation in class, 2) Unmet learning competencies; as regards to capabilities 3) Language teachers are capable, 4) Content teachers have inadequate skills, and when it comes to teachers' needs 5) Capacity building, 6) Intensification of reading intervention, and 7) Learning resources for reading.

**Keywords:** literacy; teachers challenges; capabilities; learning loss; reading difficulties.
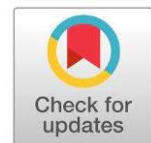
## INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most crucial core skills that students should learn because, without it, it is difficult to become proficient in other subject areas. If reading competence is not well-founded, the teaching and learning process will be challenging for both teachers and pupils. Reading skill impacts academic performance of the students (Bano et al., 2018). Reading fosters critical thinking in students and enhances reading comprehension, which is advantageous in many academic areas (Whitten et al., 2019).

Responsibilities in the acquisition of this skills is a trifocal responsibility of parents, teachers, and learners. Children's reading habits are formed with the help of their parents, and ongoing encouragement of reading improves the academic performance of the children (Kamala, 2022). Students are more likely to develop a deep attitude to reading if teachers clearly educate students how to read academic texts in subjects that are aligned and provide them with plenty of opportunities to do so throughout the term (Hermida, 2009). The motivation of the students to read is crucial factor in enhancing their reading skills, otherwise it could be a hindering factor if they do not have the desire to learn (Sari et al., 2020).

In 2018, the Philippines participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for the first time to establish a

baseline educational performance through globally accepted standards (OECD, 2019a). The Philippines scored 340 in Reading, 353 in Mathematics, and 357 in Science, all below average and the 78th among 79 participating nations (OECD, 2019b). The learning crisis has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this generation's human capital is expected to suffer long-term effects (*Urgent, Effective Action Required to Quell the Impact of COVID-19 on Education Worldwide*, 2021). Temporary school closures resulted in significant learning loss, especially for pupils with low achievement, teachers also had difficulties due to distance learning environments (Schult et al., 2022). Teaching reading and writing remotely, being unable to reach the pupils, the parents' disinterest, and students disobeying classroom regulations like speaking up and raising their hands are all negative effects of the pandemic (Özdemir & Önderöz, 2022).

The Department of Education (DepEd), Philippines understands how the PISA results reflect the overall national academic performance of learners in the country, and it is further exacerbated by the pandemic. DepEd believes that education should continue despite the imminent difficulties. To address the learning losses particularly in literacy, the Department, prior to providing interventions, must be able to understand the experiences of teachers in the classroom since the reopening of schools. According to the data presented, the country is on the far bottom of the list among economies when it comes to reading and one way to grasp the situation is to determine the capacity of teachers as well as their needs in teaching reading. Relative to this, the researchers seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of teachers handling learners with difficulties in reading?
2. How would the participants describe their capabilities in teaching reading?
3. What are the assistance needed by the participants to enhance their skills in teaching reading?

Numerous studies and books have been published regarding how reading can be taught usually for young learners. Learning from a young age is important because, children who are behind in their reading and writing development in their early years have a difficult time keeping up in later years (Qizi, 2021). The supposed strengthening of reading ability and capability of the students should happen in the elementary level, but due to the change in the delivery of learning due to the pandemic COVID-19, it aggravated the learning loss of the students, particularly in reading. The required competencies for high school students cannot be attained if students have difficulty in reading, more so in comprehension. Teachers in secondary education are considered learning areas expert compared to elementary teachers who are more generalist, in fact even in the preservice preparation for secondary teachers there is no concrete program that teachers are reading teachers as well. It should not come as a surprise that typical classroom practices frequently deviate significantly from what is advised by our most reliable sources given that a large portion of research is sadly not yet included in teacher preparation programs, widely used curricula, or professional development, as a consequence most learners do not accomplish at a high level in reading (Moats, 2020). Thus, this research wanted to find how teachers could be assisted to enhance their skills in teaching reading, particularly based on their needs, difficulties, and perceived capabilities.

## METHOD

This study utilized a Qualitative design, specifically Descriptive. Qualitative approach is used to understand people's opinions, deeds, encounters, and beliefs (Pathak et al., 2013). Qualitative Descriptive design is more appropriate when the study is not theoretically engrossed but still intends to describe participant experience (Doyle et al., 2020), and the researcher just wanted to have a straightforward delineation of the phenomena (Sandelowski, 2000).

Participants of this study are the 17 public school teachers at Congressional Integrated High School, specifically: 4 head teachers and 13 classroom teachers in different learning areas. These teachers encountered students with learning difficulties in the conduct of their classes during the first quarter of the school year 2022-2023. Purposive sampling technique is used in this study. In order to choose informants who, have specific knowledge of or experience with the subject of the empirical investigation, researchers used a purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014). Likewise, when a small number of people may serve as primary data sources because of the nature of research design and its aims and objectives, the purposive sampling method may prove useful (Camposano et al., 2021).

The researchers constructed a semi-structured interview guide which is parallel to the research aims. The researchers sent the semi-structured interview guides together with the working title, and problem statements to the experts in language and reading. Comments and suggestions from the experts were incorporated. A single Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to collect responses from the participants. Instead of using a statistically representative sample of a larger population, an FGD is widely used as a qualitative method to collect information and an in-depth awareness of situations from a chosen group of people (Taneichi & Rokkaku, 2019).

Responses of the teachers during the FGD were recorded with the use of the audio-phone application, and to ensure clarity and context, one of the researchers encoded answers as well while the lead researcher is conducting an interview, then the audio recorded responses were transcribed for analysis. A descriptive Thematic approach was employed to analyze the data and described the experiences of the informants of this study (Sundler et al., 2019). In doing the Thematic Analysis the researchers used the approach of Braun & Clarke (2006) which is recursive and not merely linear: 1) Researchers familiarization of the data, 2) Commence with the coding, 3) Search for the themes, 4) Review the themes, 5) Define and name the themes, and 5) Write the report.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study will be presented and analysed according to the objective of understanding the experiences of teachers in handling learners who are struggling with reading, determining teachers' capability in teaching reading, and identifying the support or assistance they need to enhance such capacities.

The emerging themes were tabularly presented, and supported with the selected transcripts from the participants coded with P and the number assigned to them, answers in Filipino language have translation in

English inside the parentheses.

Table 1. Teachers' experiences in handling learners with difficulties in reading

| Emerging Themes | Selected Transcripts |
|---|---|
| **Low participation in class** | *Lack of confidence, no participation in discussion* **(P1)** <br> *…can see who is not opening the mouth means not reading* (P3) <br> *...quiet in class reflecting that cannot read, hindi natatawag dahil baka mapahiya sa klase* **(P4)** <br> (Silence in class is quite telling of some students' capacity to read, hence are not called during class discussions so they would not be embarrassed.) |
| **Unmet learning competencies** | *...there are some who cannot do the activity and need one-in-one guide to explain, hindi nakakagawa ng written assessment…3-5 students per class have a problem in reading, two competencies were not covered due to slow-paced teaching* **(P5)** <br> (There are some students who cannot do the activity and need a one-on-one explanation. They cannot accomplish written assessments.) <br><br> *Direct instruction, pag nakaword problem, hindi na mabasa; 20% can read according to grade 7, ung iba kayang marecognize, pero zero during activities ay zero, even sa window cards- From MELC, Babalikan lahat para sa prerequisite ung lessons, Weeks 1-4 lang nacover,* **(P7)** <br><br> (During Math class, some students learn through direct, verbal instruction. However, in written word problems, the student finds it difficult to read and comprehend. Only 20% among Grade 7 students. The rest can recognize words yet scores zero during activities such as answering window cards. Based on MELCs, some parts had to be reviewed for the prerequisite lessons as only weeks 1 to 4 were covered.) |

**Low levels of class participation**

Although the participants come from different subject areas, three of them agreed that their students were hesitant to engage in class discussions. P1 shared how easy it is to spot a student who cannot read as some students do not like to raise a hand when asked to read a problem on board. As P5 said, "Isang letter o word ang 'di mabasa, alam na natin." (One letter or word they cannot recognize, we already knew [they have a problem in reading].) Other participants owe it to the lack of confidence a student has, especially are unable to recognize letters nor identify sounds. In a math class for instance, P7 mentioned "Pinapabasa [ang student] pero may ibang 'di nagsasalita at pahina ang boses." (When students are asked to read in chorus,

some just mouth the words or others gradually lower their voice.) P2 added how a student in class reads sentences differently.

Acknowledging that this is a problem inside the classroom, participants avoid calling struggling readers to read in front of the class because as P4 said, "Hindi natatawag dahil baka mapahiya sa klase." (Some are not called so as not to embarrass them in class). Some students said that they have poor eyesight which is rather used as an excuse to not read in class, while others pretend to open their mouth in exercises that require reading aloud.

This hesitance to participate in class because of reading difficulties slows down the teaching and learning process. Participants, to address the situation, translate the discussion in a language much more familiar to the students such as Tagalog even if the medium of instruction is in English. Moreover, some participants had to demonstrate instructions through actions so students could follow.  The achievement gap between struggling and proficient students develops over the course of a child's education because struggle readers often perform poorly on tests and show little interest in learning how to read.  Poor engagement in class is usually observed on students who struggles in literacy, and the gap between the academically struggling and proficient students becomes wider as the years of schooling progresses (Merga, 2020).

**Unmet learning competencies**

In effect, the slow-paced teaching and learning process compromised the achievement of learning competencies. Students being unable to read the problems or sentences affect their process of learning. According to the participants, when a student cannot read, it is likely that they are not able to comprehend. Even worse, students are not able to write an output. In consequence, they are unable to perform well because literacy is fundamental in all subject areas. As Moats (2020), stated that reading is a factor in all other academic success and has been the subject of the most studies since it is connected to social, emotional, financial, and physical health. This is particularly challenging for teachers because as they attempt to teach the contents, reading becomes an additional exercise in classroom instruction; therefore, delaying the attainment of target competencies scheduled for a particular week.

Table 2. Teachers' capabilities in teaching reading

| Emerging Themes | Selected Transcripts |
| --- | --- |
| **Language teachers are capable** | *8 out of 10 kaya iapply, experience as grade 2 tutor* **(P3)**<br>(I can rate myself an 8 out of 10 when it comes to teaching reading as I have experience tutoring Grade 2 pupils.)<br><br>*8 out 0f 10 nagkaron ng idea nong nagpadala ng reading teachers* **(P4)**<br>(Since being trained by elementary reading teachers, I can say I am an 8 out of 10 in teaching reading in class.)<br><br>*8.5 out of 10, may mga techniques sa pre elem na hindi kayang magawa sa HS* **(P12)**<br>(Perhaps, I am an 8.5 out of 10 but there are still techniques done with elementary instruction I have yet to apply in high school setting.) |
| **Content teachers have inadequate skills** | *…extra load for reading teachers per department outside class; teachers' capacity building, overlapping remediation class, 100+ needs remediation, content teacher to be reading teacher…* **(P10)**<br><br>*scale po natin ay 2 out of 10 ang reading capability, kayang ituro ang vocabulary hindi kaya ang grammar* **(P15)**<br>(I would only rate my capability to reach reading a 2 out of 10. I can teach vocabulary but not grammar.)<br><br>*3 out of 10, ibang level na kasi* **(P8)**<br>(I think teaching reading is on another level, so I rate myself a 3 out of 10).<br><br>*Performing arts, based on classroom observation, 96% of students can follow demonstrations, 3 or 4 out 10 rewarding capability, focus on performance in MAPEH* **(P16)** |

**Language teachers are capable**

Participants teaching language averaged around 8 out of 10 when asked to assess their capability in teaching reading. Having training with elementary teachers who are experts in teaching sound and letter recognition was helpful in developing their skills in teaching reading to their students. It aided them in facilitating lessons more effectively. When facilitating classroom learning, teachers should be proficient in language, in an effort to increase knowledge of the subject matter and proficiency in learning (Asrial et al., 2019).

**Content teachers have inadequate skills**

Subject area teachers are more concentrated on the content rather than teaching reading. Some participants can teach vocabulary, however rules on grammar are more technical in nature and require the guidance of language teachers especially in implementation. Participants said that teachers need to undergo capacity building since their background on teaching letters and sound recognition is inadequate. If all learners deserve to learn how to read from no less from their teachers, the knowledge, abilities, and capacity building for teachers should be provided (Moats, 2020).

Table 3. Support or assistance needed to enhance teachersteachers'ities in teaching reading

| Emerging Themes | Selected Transcripts |
| --- | --- |
| **Capacity building** | *Paano ung mismong gagawin sa loob ng classroom, na mabalanse ang pagtuturo ng reading pero nakakatuloy sa competencies? Tamang pamamaraan? (P10)*<br>(How do we teach reading in class while also achieving the target competencies for the subjects? What are the means to do it?)<br><br>*Teaching strategies for reading in content areas, how to embed literacy in the content areas? Mabigat ang unlocking of difficulties, ano pa ang mga strategies? simple word hindi alam ng bata, reading in the content areas* **(P13)**<br>(Unlocking difficulties is already a challenge. How much more on strategies? Learners cannot even recognize simple words.)<br><br>*seminar/ training on congruence of instructional assessment (P13)*<br><br>*Pinadalang teachers from elementary is a big help, time to have a series of follow-up, remediation activities, training/ practicum with content teachers (1 to 2 hours) patience to teach reading* **(P4)**<br>(Teachers from the elementary school were a huge help in learning how to teach reading in class.) |
| **Intensification of reading intervention** | *Special reading class* **(P5)**<br><br>*After class with focus on reading only, 1 or 2 hours intended for reading, to use the AVR as the venue on 2x or 3x a week with parental consent* **(P16)**<br><br>*Pumayag ang mga magulang pero hindi umaattend; how to encourage them to attend reading class* **(P13)**<br>(Parents allowed students for remedial reading classes but some of them were not attending.) |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Learning resources for reading** | *Additional instructional standardized reading materials, printed Marungko, dulls-Fuller for provision* **(P12)** |

**Capacity building**

According to the participants who are content teachers, learning about teaching strategies in reading would ease unlocking of target competencies which would also save them time in delivering lessons. One participant said that it would be beneficial for teachers to acquire knowledge on embedding literacy in content areas. A practicum or workshop will also be helpful in the demonstration of the actual teaching process. Professional development is important to supporting students' reading development and providing high-quality teaching methods (Didion et al., 2020).

**Intensification of reading intervention**

A special reading class was mostly recommended by the participants. However, they also emphasized how important it is to engage the students to attend the class. As P13 mentioned, although there were remedial reading sessions outside class and parental consent was secured, students fail to attend the classes. Hence, there is an emerging need for intensifying efforts in advocating for reading especially among high school students to which the participants are teaching. Different studies suggest that there is a need for ongoing study on the best ways to support teachers' implementation of intensive reading interventions because many teachers are not equipped to meet the demands of students for such interventions (McMaster et al., 2021).

**Learning resources for reading**

There is a lack of contextualized learning resources for reading. At the moment, schools rely on international standardized reading assessments which can be unsuitable for students who are non-native speakers of the English language. The Department of Education is currently working on the reading modules to be used by public school learners to foster better reading comprehension. Additionally, there is a need for more printed versions of the existing reading materials. Likewise, relevant and appropriate reading materials are important. In the study of Gir Korkmaz & Mede (2017), they investigated and highlighted the effectiveness of reading materials especially to determine their effectiveness in relation to text appropriateness, material purpose, learner needs, and vocabulary development. The information that is taught and the didactic cues from teachers are also influenced by textbooks which helps to increase reading engagement and comprehension levels of the students (Dockx et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This research attempted to answer the question of the teachers' challenges, capabilities, and needs in teaching learners with reading difficulties. With a total of 17 participants in the focus group discussion, the

study found that teachers experience low participation of students in reading or even in class discussions due to reading difficulties. Furthermore, this research revealed that content teachers struggled more in teaching their own lessons due to reading difficulties of their students. In this study, language teachers are found to be more capable in teaching reading therefore achieving target competencies better than teachers who have inadequate skills in teaching reading. To address these challenges, the participants propose capacity building, intensification of reading intervention, and provision for additional learning resources for reading.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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