

Factors Affecting Learners' Reading Proficiency In Classes Among Rural Elementary Schools

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Abstract — The study is aimed at determining the factors affecting pupil's reading proficiency in elementary schools. A descriptive-survey method of research was used in this study. The study utilized one (1) public elementary school, the San Juan Elementary School of Agdao, Davao City. The results revealed that the factor that significantly affects the reading proficiency is the teacher factor. The study concluded that the identified factors considered had a significant effect on the reading proficiency of the learners in classes. On the learners' information variable, the study revealed that gender, age, and family income do not affect the reading ability of the learners because the respondents of the study are from far- flung barangays and that this profile does not have any intervention as reflected in the PHIL-IRI test results. It was also found out that only teacher factor and pupil factor adversely affected the reading proficiency of the pupils. Further, it is recommended that the teachers who are considered as molders of the pupils' competencies especially on the ability to read, should find ways to bridge this gap by providing a lot of reading materials to the pupils and let the pupils borrow them for the parents or any of the family members to have a guide in teaching reading at home.

Keywords — Reading proficiency, elementary learners, teacher factor, descriptive-survey design

I. Introduction

Notably, children of today are the builders of the nation tomorrow and they are going to be the pillars of the country. Hence it is essential to ensure that each pillar is strong and to make it strong this needs education. Reading and writing serves as the major foundational skill for all school-based education. Family background is a powerful agent in creating the learning environment in which children are reared. Children with reading and writing difficulties still behave and perform many activities in a normal way due to their normal intelligence, but due to their surrounding environment, they may fail in scholastic skills and unknowingly undergo severe punishment by parents and sometimes by teachers (Snow et.al. 2019).

In addition, it is also mandated to protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels and shall take appropriate steps to make such educational opportunities accessible to all. The latter mandate gave rise to new directions of the Philippine educational system by introducing new thrusts to promote the welfare of the students, teachers and administrators as well as to improve the entire system of education in the country. And thus,

reforms were initiated by the education sector and redirected the objectives of the system towards equity, quality, relevance and efficiency.

Consequently, the state established three pillars in the Philippine educational system, namely; the Department of Education (DepEd) for the basic education; the Technical Education and Skills Development authority (TESDA) for vocational and technical training; the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) for the tertiary or the higher level of learning. In response to the mandate of fostering patriotism, nationalism, accelerating social progress and promoting total human liberation and development, DepEd divided basic education into the elementary level and the secondary level. The former is responsible in instilling the sense of nationhood in the critical years of the child by developing Filipino civic and social values. The latter stage expands and enriches what was learned in the elementary stage including the learning of employable gainful skills and preparing the individual for tertiary education.

In effect, the Department of Education (DepEd) continues to find ways to bring children to school in order to complete their basic education, to equip the school-age population and young adults with skills, knowledge and values is to become caring, self-reliant, productive and patriotic citizens; to develop among learners the basic competencies in literacy and numeracy, the critical and learning skills and to be socially aware, patriotic and responsible citizens. It also supervises all basic institutions both public and private for the establishment and maintenance of complete, adequate and integrated system of education for which are relevant to the goals of national development.

One of the strategies adopted by the DepEd is the holding of multi-grade classes. A multi-grade class consists of two or more different grade levels inside a single-grade classroom handled by one teacher for an entire school year. This is offered in elementary schools located in distant and sparsely populated localities in the country. According to the former Secretary of Education, Armin Luistro (Philippine Daily Inquirer. 2011) that most of the learners attending multi-grade classes are learners who belonged to the isolated and financially challenged communities, are indigenous people, and are residents in far flung mountain communities and islands where schools are far apart from each other. This strategy of multi-grade classes, former Sec. Armin Luistro added, is part of the DepEd thrusts which is to democratize access to education and make the learning experience inclusive to as many sectors.

Unfortunately, many children struggle with reading. Difficulties in reading are commonplace. The 2021 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card shows that 69% of the 4th graders in this country do not read proficiently and 36% could not even read at a basic level. Even many of the much more optimistic individual state testing results commonly show 40% failure rates. The adult literacy data shows 50% of the adults in this country are in the lowest literacy levels 1 and 2 that lack necessary literacy skills to find and keep decent jobs. The bottom line is reading difficulties are commonplace.

Reading is difficult for many individuals. Your student is NOT alone with his or her reading difficulties! Romero and Romero (2019) appreciated that “reading is worth ones’ effort, worth the little expense it may entail if any to make us well-informed, gaining access to various areas of knowledge and learning of employable gainful skills in promoting total human liberation and development. In addition, Chall (2019) gives a variety of reasons why reading is fundamental in surviving today’s society, namely; as a vital skill in finding a job, develops the minds and imagination to be creative and help one to discover new things.

Moreover, reading is important because words spoken and written are building blocks of what we become in the future. Peoples, families, relationships and even cooperation of nations are built from words. Thompson et al. (2019), remarked that, “reading proficiency, as an ability founded in school, cannot be taken for granted, for the access to words to make sense depends on the reader's interest and intelligence to understand and comprehend which draw the reality of a reader to be strong or weak. This ability, McGinnis (2019) added, depends on the influence of the many factors surrounding the learner which include the teacher factor, learner factor, environment factor and home factor. These causal factors may be related to each other as was observed by Aranda (2019). “Family members who have good reading habits are those with enough reading materials available at home, thus, giving great influence on the learner’s reading motivation. Those who are motivated to read can easily understand and comprehend their lessons much more when the teacher manifests the same motivation too.”

There are public schools where multigrade classes exist because some areas have limited class populations, especially those in the far flung barangays. This is done in cognizance and in keeping with rights of equal opportunities and the constitutional mandate of Education for All (EFA). The National Achievement Tests (NAT) in 2018 revealed that the combination classes of schools in San Juan Elementary school showed poor performance which was way below the national passing percentage of 75%. The same performance was shown in the District Reading Test. The poor performance was attributed to the decrease in the Mean Percentage Scores (MPS) in English and Filipino most especially in reading skills and in the absence of critical thinkers are reflected in the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHIL-IRI) test result.

The researcher, as a teacher of Grade III in one of the schools of the San Roque District of Agdao, Davao City would like to undertake a research and investigate the factors that affect learner’s reading proficiency. Likewise, it will also determine which of the factors influence most the reading proficiency of the learners, so that through the findings of the investigation, the teacher can devise a technique how the learners can be helped in developing their reading skill and abilities, with an end in view of improving their reading performance and in creating a positive attitude towards reading.

This study is conducted in San Juan Elementary School of Agdao District, Davao City. The respondents to this study are the learners of Grade 3 numbering about 300. Since the respondents

are all minors, an informed consent was signed by parents who permitted their children to participate in the study.

Observers of rural education research have termed it “scant,” noting that the area has received much less attention than urban education (Sherwood, 2019). The most comprehensive recent review of research on rural education is undoubtedly that of Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2019). Systematically examining studies that appeared over a number of years, Arnold and associates developed a research agenda for rural school improvement including improving students’ “opportunity to learn,” promoting teacher quality and professional development, and strengthening the capacity of rural schools and districts to improve student achievement.

In a rather provocative exchange, commentators challenged this agenda, implying that it ignored the “meaningfulness” of rural life (Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2019). In a response, one of the original authors and a colleague restated the underlying premise of their review:

All children and schools, including those in rural settings, deserve access to the very best information about high-quality and effective schooling.... It is no longer adequate, in this day and age of research sophistication, to argue the value and success of rural education based solely on belief in and passion for rural communities. Nor is it adequate to argue that rural education is too unique to be the subject of rigorous research, or that scientific inquiry and sound decision making are not relevant to rural education and communities. We must move beyond these beliefs and philosophical conjectures toward more rigorous research-based knowledge that gives us the information needed to direct and improve rural educational systems (Cicchinelli & Dean, 2019).

The present work shares this philosophical orientation and research aim, focusing on the improvement of reading skills of elementary students in rural settings.

Reading Research. Reading experts stress that early development of reading has a long-term impact on a child’s future. Some (Stanovich, 2019) have used the term “Matthew effect,” using the Biblical quotation that the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” to describe the cumulative effects of good or poor reading skills on later academic success. A large body of empirical evidence demonstrates that children who can read fluently in first grade have much more success throughout their school careers. Early reading fluency results in exposure to much greater volume of material, and thus also produces a strikingly greater accumulation of vocabulary, language skills, and general knowledge (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2019; Gough & Juel, 2021; Juel, 2019; Stanovich, 2019)

An even larger body of research, spanning several decades, has documented the importance of systematic and explicit instruction in promoting reading achievement. In a review of the literature, Arrasmith (2022) defined explicit reading instruction as being unambiguous and clear, leaving a student “no need for inference or difficulty in understanding instruction.” Examples of strategies used in such programs include clear instructional targets, modeling, guided and independent practice with corrections, and assessments embedded within the instruction.

Arrasmith defines systematic curriculum as a “logical, research-based sequence of educational activities.” Systematic curricula include a comprehensive scope and strategic sequence of instruction, and a consistent instructional format. Individual studies as well as extensive meta-analyses show that curricula that embody these elements consistently produce larger achievement gains (Murphy, 2019; Smith et al., 2021; Snider, 2020; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 2019; Stanovich, 2019).

This analysis focuses on the implementation of one well-established systematic and explicit reading program, Reading Mastery (RM), which is part of the Direct Instruction (DI) corpus of curricula. The DI model was first developed about four decades ago based on work with preschoolers in an “at-risk” population (Engelmann, 2018). All DI programs seek efficiency and effectiveness of instruction through program design, organization of instruction, and positive student-teacher interaction. The approach attempts to control all the major variables that impact student learning through the placement and grouping of students into instructional groups, the rate and type of examples presented by the teacher, the wording that teachers use to teach specific concepts and skills, the frequency and type of review of material introduced, the assessment of students’ mastery of material covered, and the responses by teachers to students’ attempts to learn the material.

The programs are constructed according to a small-step design that teaches isolated skills and concepts in separate tracks that are systematically integrated with skills and concepts in other tracks in increasingly sophisticated applications. For this reason, lessons do not focus on a single skill or topic. Instead, only about 10% of a lesson’s contents are new. The rest of the lesson is devoted to reviewing and applying skills and concepts that were introduced in previous lessons. Placement in the program is a critical factor in the program’s success as appropriate placement allows students to learn new concepts and skills each day (Collins & Carnine, 2019; Engelmann, 2019; Engelman & Carnine, 2019; Gersten, Darch, & Gleason, 2019; Huit, Monetti, & Hummel, 2019). A number of meta-analytic studies indicate that students who receive reading instruction in this approach have higher levels of reading achievement and stronger growth in reading skills over time than students in other curricula. These results appear with all of the measures typically used to measure reading achievement, including reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2019; Hattie, 2019; Herman et al., 2019).

This study is anchored from the Schema Theory by Rummelhart as cited by Ortony (2019) which gives an overview on how information is shaped and stored into the readers’ mind through reading. The theory expounded that any text spoken or written does not by itself carry meaning. This text only provides directions as to how a reader should retrieve or construct meaning from previously acquired knowledge. Comprehending words, sentences, and the entire texts requires the ability to relate the materials to one’s own stored knowledge. Effective reading is a combination of the non-visual information already stored or organized in the brain and the present visual information printed on the page.

The Schema Theory is supported by the Field Theory of Kurt Lewin, as mentioned by Tulio (2020), which advocated that to predict a behavior, the person and his environment have to be considered as one constellation of independent factors. The notion of field refers to (a) all aspects of individuals in relationship with his surroundings and conditions, (b) the apparent influence to a particular behavior by the individual's needs and personality, and (c) the individual's motivating forces at a particular point in time. In this theory, Lewin postulated that any behavior is the result of the equilibrium between driving and restraining forces in the field where the individual is situated. The increase of the driving forces might increase the performance of a given behavior and the increase of the restraining forces decreases the performance of a given behavior. Thus, to maintain the equilibrium for a given behavior one has to decrease the restraining forces found in the environment to have the continuum of a behavior.

Based on the two theories, the learner's reading proficiency is the particular behavior the child needs to achieve and the field of combination classes the Grade III learners are in.

The schematic diagram on the next page showed the conceptual flow of the study anchored from the theories of Rummelhart's Schema Theory cited by Ortony (2019) and of Kurt Lewin's Field Theory cited by Tulio (2020). The learner's ability in reading as shown in their reading proficiency performance in the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory conducted yearly to all grades one to four learners in all public elementary schools in the country. The result gives an overview on how reading ability is shaped and stored into the readers' mind through the teachers.

The theory expounded that any text spoken or written does not by itself carry significant meaning, but the comprehension or understanding of what is being read. This text only provides directions as to how a reader should retrieve or construct meaning from previously acquired knowledge. Comprehending words, sentences, and the entire texts requires the ability to relate the materials to one's own stored knowledge. The selected factors which included the teacher, learner, environment and the home are the forces that influence the reading proficiency of the learners in the field of reading performance of the Grades III in the San Juan Elementary School in Agdao District, Davao City. Any of these selected factors can be a driving force or a restraining force as mentioned in the Field Theory of Kurt Lewin. This study investigated which of the factors can be the driving force or the restraining force which equilibrium resulted to the reading ability of the learners.

The diagram shows the independent and dependent variables of the study and its expected effect. The independent variables are the selected factors consisting of the teacher factors, the learner factor, the environment factor and the home factor. These factors are independent because they stimulate the dependent variable which is the reading proficiency.

The gender, age and the family income of the learners and the age, sex, educational attainment, teaching experience and relevant trainings of the teachers are taken into consideration in the study because these can also be forces which equilibrium result into the behavior of the

learners and teachers which are considered too as factors affecting the reading proficiency. The learner's and the teacher's profiles were seen by the researcher as the intervening variables that could interfere with the relationship of the factors and the reading proficiency of the Grades III classes of schools in San Juan Elementary School, Agdao District, Division of Davao City.

II. Methodology

The study made use of the descriptive-survey design. The said design according to Good and Scates as cited in Seleger and Shohamy (2021) is an appropriate design whenever the objects of any class vary among themselves and one is interested in knowing the extent to which different conditions affect these objects. The word survey signifies the gathering of data regarding the present conditions. In this study the researcher wanted to determine which of the factors affect the pupils reading proficiency using a survey questionnaire.

The study was conducted to the classes of Grades III of San Juan Elementary School in the Agdao District of the Division of Davao City. This school is located in the barangay of Agdao, Davao City. The classrooms of these classes were typical to a public elementary school of the DepEd. It was situated in a crowded area and the security of the classroom was not very good, the teachers were hesitant to leave their teaching materials and visual aids in the classroom, though the rooms were well ventilated and free from disturbances. The teachers handling the classes were mostly not from the barangay itself but from other parts of the city who used to go to school driving their own motorcycle or were sent off by their spouses. The school was usually supervised by a principal. The respondents of the study were all the Grades III learners in classes and all the teachers handling the classes.

The instrument used in the study was patterned from a standardized questionnaire by Weigfield and Guthrie (2017) and the teacher questionnaire based from the International Education Association (IEA) Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2006) and international research project sponsored by the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAEEA). The said questionnaires which the researcher had patterned were slightly modified or revised to suit the Philippine setting and the comprehension of the respondents. The revised and modified adopted questionnaire underwent strict evaluation and review by the panel before it was pilot tested in Agdao District. Permission was granted by the supervisor of the District for the researcher to conduct the dry-run of the questionnaire to 15 teachers of the pupils each from Grades III.

The raw data from the pilot test conducted was then brought by the researcher to her adviser who after seeing them advised the researcher to bring the said raw data to the assigned statistician. The assigned statistician interpreted the responses and tested the validity by means of the Cronbach Alpha Coefficient with a validity result of 0.916 interpreted as valid and reliable. The questionnaire for the parents of the pupils was with vernacular translation for better understanding of what is

being asked. The researcher humbly asked the Phil- IRI results from the district supervisor and then submitted it to the statistician together with the data gathered from the respondents of the different instruments.

To determine the reading level of the pupils, the following computation is used:

- A. Word Recognition (WR): $\frac{\text{No. of major miscue (M)}}{\text{No. of words in the passage (N)}} \times 100 = \% \text{ of M}$
 $\% \text{ correct} = 100\% - \% \text{ of M}$
- B. Comprehension (C): $\frac{\text{No. of correct answers}}{\text{No. of questions}} \times 100 = \% \text{ of CR}$

The Phil-IRI Oral Test Criteria used:
Word Recognition

Level	WR		Comprehension
Independent	97-100%	and	80% - 100%
Instructional	90- 96%	and	59% - 79%
Frustration	89 below	or	58% - below

In answering specific questions on the factors of reading and on the reading proficiency level of the pupils which are questions no. 1 & 2, the researcher utilized the weighted mean. While the percentage with rank was used in answering questions no. 3 which are for the information variables of the learners. And in answering questions no. 4 & 5 which are questions on relationships, the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation (r) was employed.

III. Results and Discussion

Reading proficiency of learners in reference to frustration level, instruction level, and independence level

The results showed that of the 321 grade 3 tested, most pupils belong to frustration level. This implies that there were only a few respondents who were proficient in reading. Thus, this further implies that the learners in the classes of San Juan Elementary School, Agdao District mostly belong to the frustration level and that they need closed supervision and follow-up by their teachers and parents in order to become a proficient reader.

Factors in reading of learners in terms of teacher factor, pupil factor, environment factor, and home factor

There are four factors in the study identified to have influenced the reading proficiency of the pupils. These are teacher factor, pupil factor, environment factor, and home factor and are

treated one after the other based on their frequency. The result implies that the identified factors had a different frequency level or degree of influence because each factor is assumed to have relevance and has a material effect on the pupil's reading proficiency. Teacher Factor assumes the biggest rank and has the most influence on the learners' reading proficiency.

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Information variables of learners in terms of gender, age, and family income

. It showed that out of 321 respondents, 50.47% were females and 49.53% were males. This implies that the majority of the respondents were females because based on the ratio of males to females, it was evident that males were fewer than females. Sex was relevant in this study because it has been observed that females love reading more than males.

The highest age of the pupils was 10 years old because of the 321 respondents, it was 28.08% and the lowest age of the pupils was 8 years old because it was only 5.05% of the total population. The common age of the pupils who belong to grade III were 10 years old. Age matters in this study because the bigger the age of the pupils the more mature he is in grasping the lesson and the readier he is in learning the lesson depends upon his maturity and most of the time this was determined by his age.

Results show that most of the respondents have an income of below 5,000 which is 76.92% of the total population because these respondents are from far flung barangays. This implies that most of the pupils were poor because their parents had low income. The source of livelihood in this area where the combination classes were located was just farming and so it is evident that their income was only 5,000 and below. However, there were also pupils whose parents had a family income of 20,000 and above or 1.58% of the total respondents because the occupations of these parents were Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW).

Significant relationship between the factors of reading and the reading proficiency of learners

Based on the result on the t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means computation, it showed that the teacher factor, pupil factor had a low degree to negative correlation on the pupils reading proficiency while environment factor and home factor have no correlation on the pupil's reading proficiency. This implies that these two factors were highly correlated to the reading proficiency of the pupils.

In other words, the more frequent were the factors affecting reading the higher was the proficiency and the less were the factors affecting reading the lower was the proficiency. It was found out that environment factor as one of the variables in this investigation had little effect on the reading proficiency of the pupils because it showed low degree to positive correlation.

Discussion

A strong relationship between the Department of Education and rural schools is also important. Teachers should be assisted through training by the Department of Education on how to teach and assess reading. This could be accomplished by offering an early grade reading assessment tool to aid teachers in assessing learners' reading development at various intervals.

In addition, there are literacy intervention programs sponsored by the Department of Education at public schools. Programs like this should be introduced to the rural communities to support the rural schools. A strong relationship between the school and parents is recommended. As the results of the study revealed that the majority of parents are not educated, the schools should organize parents' meetings where the importance of reading at home is emphasized. This could be achieved by emphasizing the role of the community versus the individual family. There should be a reading community service that assists learners after school. This community mini-library should hire local people who could assist as librarians and should allow local learners to borrow reading material.

IV. Conclusion

The factors affecting pupils' reading proficiency, based on the result of the study, are highly laid in the hands of a teacher. Therefore, it can be said that teachers are the most important and the most potent tool in the education system. With the furor over teachers and education growing annually, it would be good to take a long, hard look at the future, to see what must be done to attract bright, creative, and talented men and women to the teaching profession.

One good place to start is to elevate the pay structure of teachers to a respectable level of livelihood, and place the welfare of the teachers in the top of the priorities of the government that will help attract the cream-of-the-crop individuals to the teaching profession. In this case, the pupil's reading proficiency would somehow be improved and the result of this study would be changed from frustration level to independent level. And if this independent level in reading is achieved, that would be the time to say that the pupils can be competent in their other subjects and in the end they can have a better performance in the school.

The age, gender, and family income of the pupils in this study are not the determining factors in achieving reading proficiency as found in this study because the respondents of this investigation were from far flung barangays and that they have no access to reading materials in

the environment, and in the home. But when they have no school, pupils of these classes were used to run errands by their parents like gathering firewood, baby sitting with their younger brothers and sisters, tending their tamed animals in the meadow, weeding and tilling the soil in the farm, and some were doing the laundry. So there were really no other avenues for them to engage in reading except when they were in school.

Another reason for this is that most parents do not have follow-up with the reading progress of their children in school. Thus, the low reading proficiency results of the respondents of this study were all attributed to the home and environment factor because they have not done any intervention to improve the reading proficiency of their children. That is why pupils also despite their age, gender, and family income were not also aware or even cared to aspire good performance in reading.

Teaching performance of the teacher in teaching reading is influenced by his educational qualification and experience. Therefore, the more experienced the teacher, the better the performance. The higher educational qualification a teacher has the more strategy and techniques he has in teaching reading.

In the context of the study, the author (researcher) believes that literacy is a strategy for improving rural life and a weapon to fight poverty. The results of this study identified factors that may be regarded as barriers to learners' reading performance. Having this information is likely to assist the key stakeholders who are responsible for the reading performance of learners in rural schools. The stakeholders are parents, teachers, and the Department of Education. The author argues that the reading performance of rural learners requires a strong parent-teacher interaction. Teachers as professional partners are expected to play a major role in establishing this relationship. Teachers are encouraged to discover creative ways to involve parents in their children's reading. It seems this can be accomplished by keeping parents informed about their children's reading struggles and successes. As a result, frequent communication between the teacher and the parent is likely to keep parents informed about what is going on at school with regard to the child's reading performance. Teachers should not just communicate bad information about learners' reading performance with parents; good information about learners' progress should also be shared with parents so that parents can celebrate their children's accomplishments.

The author believes that discussing a learner's accomplishment in reading can help to establish a positive connection, so that for example when a teacher has to disclose something unpleasant it is less damaging to the parent-teacher-learner relationship. Teachers are more likely to stay in touch with parents if they share progress reports about their children's reading achievement. The author believes that collaboration should be encouraged not only between parents and teachers, but also among parents. Teachers, for example, could help foster the link between illiterate and literate parents so that the literate parents can assist the illiterate parents' children. This could be useful for parents who are neighbors.

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She is a positive person in life and courageous; she believes that God is the source of everything and that we are all nothing without God.