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Navigating the rural landscape: understanding the causes of reading difficulties in high school students

Jocan B. Palahang

BSEd English Program, Faculty of English and Professional Education, J.H. Cerilles State College Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines, 7042

Corresponding Author: jocan.palahang@jhsc.edu.ph

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research investigates the complex eight factors contributing to reading difficulties among high school students in a rural area of Mindanao, Philippines. The researcher, as the primary instrument, conducted in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and community members which provided qualitative insights into the lived experiences and perspectives surrounding reading difficulties. The research identified a multifaceted web of challenges: socioeconomic, environmental, instructional, linguistic, technological, health and wellness, school-related, and community factors. The findings highlight the critical need for comprehensive interventions addressing these interconnected challenges. Recommendations include community engagement programs, violence prevention initiatives, professional development for teachers, curriculum enhancement, technology integration, wellness programs, increased school funding, and resource allocation. By addressing these multifaceted issues, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders can work collaboratively to create a supportive and enriching educational environment for students in rural areas, ultimately enhancing their reading abilities and academic success.

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1. Introduction

Reading proficiency is crucial for academic success, personal growth, and societal engagement (Smith, 2018). Yet, for many students, particularly those in rural areas, achieving fluency in reading poses a significant challenge. This research, conducted in a rural region of Mindanao, Philippines, delves into the intricate factors contributing to reading difficulties among high school students who completed their elementary education in remote barangays.

A noteworthy literacy issue in the Philippines persists, with rural communities often facing disparities compared to urban areas, hindering educational progress (Department of Education, 2020).

Mindanao stands out due to its geographic isolation, limited resources, and socioeconomic hurdles that further exacerbate educational inequalities (National Statistical Coordination Board, 2015).

While existing studies have underscored the multifaceted nature of reading difficulties, focusing on socioeconomic, environmental, instructional, linguistic, and psychological factors (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Chall, 1983), a gap remains in addressing the distinct challenges encountered by rural Filipino students.

This study endeavors to fill this gap by examining the specific causes of reading challenges among high school students from remote barangays in Mindanao. By exploring the experiences of these students, their families, and educators, the research aims to shed light on the complex web of factors contributing to their reading struggles. Furthermore, it centers on uncovering the factors contributing to reading difficulties among high school students who completed their education in remote barangays in rural Mindanao, Philippines.

This study identifies and analyzes the key factors contributing to reading difficulties among students from remote barangays. It also seeks to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of these students, their families, and educators concerning reading challenges. Additionally, the research aims to provide insights to guide the development of targeted interventions and support strategies to address reading difficulties among rural students in the Philippines.

This research is pivotal for enhancing literacy outcomes in rural Philippine regions by pinpointing the specific causes of reading difficulties. It offers valuable insights for educators to tailor teaching practices to effectively meet the needs of rural students, for policymakers to design interventions to address the unique challenges rural learners face, and for community leaders to cultivate community involvement and support for literacy initiatives.

Drawing upon the Social-Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this study acknowledges the complex interplay of factors at various levels—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. This model provides a holistic perspective on the influences shaping reading difficulties among rural students.

This study investigates critical areas, including socioeconomic, environmental, instructional, linguistic, health and wellness, school-related, and community factors. By exploring these dimensions, the research aims to offer insights into rural students' challenges in Mindanao and propose practical solutions to enhance reading outcomes in these communities.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the causes of reading difficulties among high school students. The approach focused on understanding the social, cultural, and environmental factors influencing these challenges through the experiences and perspectives of participants.

Participants included high school students, teachers, and community members. In-depth interviews were used as the primary data collection method to capture their lived experiences and insights. The interviews featured open-ended questions to allow participants to freely express their percep-

tives, providing detailed and nuanced information about the factors contributing to reading difficulties.

The collected interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved systematically coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns. Themes were then organized and interpreted to reveal critical insights into the causes of reading difficulties. The analysis aimed to comprehensively understand the issue within its specific context.

The study followed strict ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement, and their confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. Data were securely stored to protect participants' privacy, and the research process was conducted with respect for their rights and well-being.

3. Results and Discussion

The research aimed to illuminate the complex eight factors contributing to reading challenges among high school students. The study explored those eight themes: socioeconomic, environmental, instructional, linguistic, technological, health and wellness, school-related, and community factors. This analysis revealed a multifaceted web of challenges that significantly impact students' reading proficiency, highlighting the need for a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to address these issues.

3.1 Socioeconomic factors

The research findings shed light on socioeconomic factors' significant impact on students' reading difficulties. Limited access to resources emerged as a critical barrier to reading proficiency among students in the study. The lack of essential reading materials, such as books and educational resources, hindered students' ability to engage effectively with literacy activities (Smith, 2018). This limitation created a challenging learning environment, restricting students' exposure to diverse reading materials essential for developing strong literacy skills.

The study identified poverty and low socioeconomic status as key contributors to reading difficulties among high school students. Economic constraints often prevent students from accessing adequate resources and educational support to improve their reading abilities (Mngomezulu, Dhunpath, & Munro, 2017). The financial challenges faced by families in rural areas directly impacted students' opportunities for academic growth and literacy development.

The research highlighted the significant influence of parental education and involvement on students' reading proficiency. Limited parental education levels often correlate with lower levels of support for children's literacy development (Adams & Martinez, 2020). The absence of parental involvement in promoting reading habits and providing educational guidance posed a considerable obstacle to students' reading success (Yustisia & Salsabila, 2023).

The study revealed a concerning trend of higher rates of absenteeism and truancy among students facing socioeconomic challenges. Students from low-income families were likelier to miss school, impacting their regular participation in reading-related activities (Garcia et al., 2021). Absenteeism

and truancy further exacerbated reading difficulties by disrupting students' consistent engagement with learning opportunities.

Limited access to resources, poverty, low parental education and involvement, as well as high rates of absenteeism and truancy collectively contribute to the complex challenges students face in developing strong reading skills. Addressing these socioeconomic barriers is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment where students can thrive academically and overcome reading difficulties. Interventions aimed at enhancing resource access, providing support for families, and promoting regular school attendance are essential for mitigating the adverse effects of socioeconomic factors on students' literacy development. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can work towards fostering a more equitable educational landscape that empowers all students to succeed in their reading endeavors.

3.2 Environmental factors

The study examined the impact of environmental factors on reading difficulties among students. The analysis revealed significant insights into the challenges posed by rural isolation, limited access to libraries and reading materials, inadequate technology infrastructure, and environmental distractions on students' reading proficiency.

Rural isolation and limited opportunities were identified as key environmental factors contributing to reading difficulties among students. The lack of exposure to diverse learning experiences and educational resources due to geographic remoteness posed a significant barrier to students' reading development (Johnson & Lee, 2019). The isolation from urban centers and educational hubs limited students' access to enrichment activities and academic support, exacerbating their reading challenges.

A critical finding was the limited access to libraries and reading materials in rural areas, impacting students' exposure to a wide range of literary resources (Brown, 2018). The scarcity of libraries and reading materials hindered students' ability to engage with varied texts and expand their vocabulary, which is crucial for developing strong reading skills (Garcia et al., 2020). This limitation underscored the importance of enhancing library services and providing adequate reading materials to support students' literacy development.

The study highlighted the adverse effects of limited technology infrastructure on students' reading proficiency. The lack of access to digital resources and educational tools hindered students' engagement with technology-integrated learning, essential for promoting digital literacy and enhancing reading comprehension (Smith, 2020). Inadequate technology infrastructure limited students' exposure to online reading materials and interactive learning platforms, impeding their reading development.

Environmental distractions, such as noise pollution, household responsibilities, and agricultural activities, emerged as significant challenges impacting students' reading focus and concentration (Adams & Martinez, 2019). The distractions in the students' learning environment disrupted their reading routines and hindered their ability to engage with textual content fully. Addressing environmental distractions is crucial for creating conducive learning environments that support students' reading comprehension and retention.

Rural isolation, limited access to libraries and reading materials, inadequate technology infrastructure, and ecological distractions collectively contribute to reading difficulties among students. Addressing these environmental challenges requires targeted interventions to enhance access to educational resources, improve technology infrastructure, reduce ecological distractions, and promote a conducive learning environment for effective reading instruction. By recognizing and mitigating the impact of environmental factors on students' reading proficiency, educators and policymakers can create supportive learning environments that empower students to overcome reading challenges and thrive academically.

3.3 Instructional factors

Examining instructional factors revealed critical insights into the challenges impacting reading proficiency among students. The study focused on four key themes within the instructional domain: limited teacher training and support, high teacher turnover rates, limited access to reading specialists, and inadequate reading curriculum and materials.

The analysis highlighted the detrimental effects of limited teacher training and support on students' reading development. Educators lacking adequate training in literacy instruction struggled to effectively address the diverse needs of students (Smith & Johnson, 2018). The absence of ongoing professional development opportunities hindered teachers from implementing evidence-based practices promoting reading skills (Didion, Toste, & Filderman, 2020).

High teacher turnover rates emerged as a significant barrier to improved student literacy. The frequent rotation of educators disrupted continuity in reading instruction, leading to inconsistencies in teaching methods and student support (Nguyen et al., 2020). This instability impacted the quality of education and hindered the establishment of strong teacher-student relationships crucial for effective learning (Adams & Martinez, 2019).

The lack of access to reading specialists posed a challenge in providing targeted interventions for students with reading difficulties. Without specialized support, students requiring additional literacy assistance were underserved, impacting their progress in developing essential reading skills (Jones & Kim, 2017). The absence of expert guidance limited the implementation of personalized strategies to address individual learning needs (Chen & Lee, 2018).

Inadequate reading curriculum and materials were identified as critical contributors to reading challenges among students. Outdated or insufficient resources hindered student engagement and comprehension, limiting opportunities for meaningful literacy development (Gonzalez & Rodriguez, 2020). The lack of diverse reading materials also restricted students' exposure to various genres and topics, impacting their reading proficiency (Meniado, 2016).

Limited teacher training and support, high turnover rates, restricted access to specialists, and inadequate curriculum and materials collectively hinder students' progress in developing strong literacy skills. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions to enhance educator training, reduce turnover, increase specialist support, and improve the quality and relevance of reading instruction materials. By investing in professional development, retention strategies, specialized assistance, and curriculum enhancements, educational stakeholders can create a more supportive environment conducive to improved student reading outcomes.

3.4 Linguistic factors

Examining linguistic factors, precisely linguistic diversity and limited English proficiency, revealed significant insights into the reading difficulties among students.

Linguistic diversity within the community has become a prominent factor affecting students' reading proficiency. Students from varied linguistic backgrounds faced challenges engaging with English-language reading materials (Nguyen & Kim, 2018). The presence of multiple languages in the learning environment highlighted the need for tailored language support in reading instruction to cater to the diverse linguistic needs of students (Garcia et al., 2020).

Limited English proficiency was a significant barrier to effective reading skills development among high school students. Students with lower English language skills struggled to comprehend and analyze English texts, impacting their reading comprehension (Jones & Brown, 2017). The lack of English proficiency hindered students' ability to engage with the curriculum and access essential reading materials in the language of instruction (Smith, 2020).

The findings underscore the critical importance of addressing linguistic factors in enhancing reading outcomes among students in rural areas. Strategies to support linguistic diversity and improve English proficiency are crucial for promoting reading proficiency among students. Tailored language support programs, bilingual resources, and language immersion initiatives can play a vital role in bridging the linguistic gap and fostering a conducive learning environment for students with diverse language backgrounds (Adams & Martinez, 2019).

Moreover, professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills in supporting linguistically diverse classrooms are essential. By equipping educators with effective instructional strategies and resources, schools can better cater to the linguistic needs of students and create an inclusive learning environment that fosters reading success (Williams, 2016).

Addressing linguistic factors in reading instruction is key to improving reading proficiency and promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in the educational setting. By recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity, educators can empower students to leverage their language skills as assets in their reading development, ultimately enhancing their overall academic success (Chen & Liu, 2018).

3.5 Technological factors

The study investigated the impact of technological factors on reading difficulties among students, focusing on limited internet access, digital literacy, outdated technology infrastructure, and limited online resources and educational tools.

Limited internet access and digital literacy emerged as significant barriers to reading proficiency among students in rural areas (Smith, 2019). The lack of reliable internet connectivity restricted students' access to online reading materials, participation in digital learning activities, and engagement with educational resources beyond the classroom. Additionally, the absence of digital literacy skills hindered students' ability to navigate online platforms effectively and critically evaluate digital information, impacting their reading comprehension and information processing abilities (Jones & Garcia, 2018).

The presence of outdated technology infrastructure further exacerbated students' challenges in developing their reading skills (Brown & Martinez, 2020). Inadequate access to modern technology tools and devices limited students' exposure to interactive learning experiences and innovative reading resources. The lack of up-to-date technological resources hindered students' engagement with digital texts, online libraries, and educational applications, impeding their ability to enhance their reading abilities through digital platforms (Nguyen & Lee, 2017).

The study also highlighted the scarcity of online resources and educational tools available to students in rural areas (Adams, 2019). The limited access to digital libraries, academic websites, and interactive learning platforms restricted students' opportunities for self-directed learning, research, and exploration of diverse reading materials. The absence of innovative educational tools further constrained students' ability to engage with dynamic and interactive reading experiences, limiting their exposure to varied literary genres and informational texts crucial for developing advanced reading skills (Gonzalez & Rodriguez, 2021).

Limited internet access, digital literacy, outdated technology infrastructure, and a lack of online resources and educational tools present substantial challenges to reading proficiency among students. Addressing these technological barriers is crucial for enhancing students' access to digital learning resources, fostering digital literacy skills, and creating a technologically enriched learning environment that supports and enhances students' reading abilities. By investing in updated technology infrastructure, promoting digital literacy programs, and expanding access to online educational resources, educators and policymakers can empower students to overcome technological barriers and develop strong reading skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning.

3.6 Health and wellness factors

The study examined the impact of health and wellness factors, specifically mental health concerns, nutrition, and sleep deprivation, on reading difficulties among students.

The analysis revealed a significant correlation between mental health concerns, particularly anxiety and depression, and reading difficulties among students. Research by Smith (2018) indicated that students experiencing anxiety and depression often struggle with concentration, memory retention, and cognitive processing, all of which are essential for adequate reading comprehension. These mental health challenges can create emotional barriers that hinder students' engagement with reading materials and impede academic performance (Johnson & Lee, 2019).

Nutrition emerged as a critical factor influencing students' reading abilities. Studies by Brown (2017) and Garcia et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of proper nutrition in cognitive development and academic performance. Inadequate nutrition can lead to deficiencies in essential nutrients for brain function, affecting students' attention span, memory, and learning capacity. Poor dietary habits and lack of access to nutritious meals can impact students' reading skills and overall academic success (Adams & Martinez, 2019).

The research findings underscored the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation on reading proficiency. Lack of sufficient sleep can impair cognitive function, memory consolidation, and information processing, critical for adequate reading comprehension (Nguyen & Kim, 2018). Studies by

Jones & Brown (2017) and Smith (2020) have shown that sleep-deprived students often exhibit decreased concentration, reduced alertness, and poor academic performance, highlighting the negative impact of inadequate sleep on reading abilities.

The results indicate that addressing health and wellness factors is integral to improving student reading outcomes. Mental health concerns, nutrition, and sleep deprivation can significantly impact students' cognitive abilities, emotional well-being, and academic performance. By recognizing the interplay of these factors with reading difficulties, educators, health professionals, and policymakers can implement targeted interventions and support strategies to promote students' overall well-being and enhance their reading skills.

Effective interventions may include mental health support services to address anxiety and depression, nutritional programs to ensure access to balanced meals, and educational initiatives to promote healthy sleep habits (Walker & Garcia, 2020). By fostering a holistic approach to student well-being, schools and communities can create environments that support optimal learning conditions and effectively empower students to overcome reading challenges.

3.7 School-Related factors

The analysis of School-Related Factors, including limited school funding and resources, large class sizes, inadequate staffing, and limited extracurricular activities, provided crucial insights into the challenges faced by students.

Limited school funding and resources emerged as significant barriers impacting students' reading development (Smith, 2019). Insufficient financial support hindered schools from acquiring necessary reading materials, maintaining libraries, and implementing literacy programs effectively. This lack of resources directly affected students' access to diverse and engaging reading materials, limiting their opportunities for literacy enrichment.

The study revealed that large class sizes and inadequate staffing posed notable obstacles to effective reading instruction (Johnson & Lee, 2018). With overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of qualified teachers, individualized attention and targeted reading support were compromised. The student-teacher ratio directly impacted the quality of reading interventions and personalized literacy instruction, hindering students' development of essential reading skills.

The absence of extracurricular activities contributed to reading difficulties among students (Garcia et al., 2020). Limited opportunities for students to engage in reading-related extracurricular programs, such as book clubs, reading challenges, or literary events, deprived them of additional avenues to foster a love for reading outside the classroom. The lack of extracurricular activities restricted students' exposure to diverse reading materials and interactive literacy experiences, impacting their overall reading engagement and motivation.

The results underscore the critical role of school-related factors in shaping students' reading experiences and proficiency levels. Limited school funding and resources, compounded by large class sizes and inadequate staffing, pose significant challenges to providing quality reading instruction and support. Insufficient financial support restricts schools' capacity to invest in essential reading re-

sources, while overcrowded classrooms and a lack of qualified teachers impede individualized reading interventions. Additionally, the absence of extracurricular activities limits students' opportunities for supplementary reading enrichment beyond the structured curriculum.

Addressing these school-related challenges requires a comprehensive approach that prioritizes adequate funding for literacy programs, reducing class sizes to enhance teacher-student interactions, and expanding extracurricular opportunities to cultivate a reading culture outside traditional classroom settings. By investing in resources, staffing, and extracurricular initiatives that promote reading engagement and proficiency, schools can create a supportive learning environment that empowers students to develop strong literacy skills and a lifelong love for reading.

3.8 Community factors

The study delved into the impact of community factors on reading difficulties among students, focusing specifically on the absence of community resources and support and the prevalence of community violence.

The absence of community resources and support emerged as a significant barrier to reading proficiency among students in rural areas. Limited access to libraries, tutoring services, and educational programs hindered students' opportunities for supplemental learning and literacy development (Smith, 2018). Additionally, the lack of community support networks and mentorship programs deprived students of valuable resources that could enhance their reading skills and overall academic performance (Johnson & Lee, 2019).

Community violence was identified as a pervasive challenge impacting students' reading experiences and emotional well-being. Exposure to violence in the community created a stressful and unsafe environment for students, leading to heightened levels of anxiety, fear, and trauma (Brown, 2017). The presence of community violence not only disrupted students' ability to focus on reading tasks but also contributed to emotional barriers that hindered their engagement with literacy activities (Garcia et al., 2020).

The absence of community resources and support, coupled with instances of community violence, created a challenging environment for high school students in the rural area. The lack of access to educational resources and supportive networks, combined with the presence of violence in the community, underscored the need for targeted interventions to address these community factors and create a safer, more conducive environment for students to thrive academically (Adams & Martinez, 2019).

By recognizing the detrimental impact of community factors on reading difficulties, educators, policymakers, and community leaders can collaborate to implement strategies that promote community engagement, provide additional support resources, and address issues of violence to create a more nurturing and supportive environment for students in the rural area of Mindanao. Addressing these community challenges is essential to fostering a conducive learning environment that empowers students to overcome reading difficulties and succeed academically (Williams, 2016).

4. Conclusion

The research explored the causes of reading difficulties among high school students and uncovered a complex interplay of eight factors spanning socioeconomic, environmental, instructional, linguistic, technological, health and wellness, school-related, and community domains. These findings illuminate students' challenges navigating the rural landscape and offer insights for targeted interventions and support strategies.

The study revealed that limited access to resources, driven by poverty and low socioeconomic status, first significantly impacted students' reading proficiency. Second, the absence of community support and resources, coupled with instances of community violence, created a challenging environment for students to engage effectively with reading activities. Furthermore, environmental factors such as rural isolation and limited access to libraries hindered students' opportunities for academic enrichment. Third, instructional challenges, including limited teacher training and inadequate curriculum, further compounded the reading difficulties faced by students. Fourth, linguistic diversity and limited English proficiency added complexity to language-based learning tasks next, while technological limitations restricted students' access to digital learning resources. Then, health and wellness factors, encompassing mental health concerns, nutrition, and sleep deprivation, emerged as critical influencers of students' cognitive abilities and emotional well-being, impacting their reading performance. Finally, school-related challenges, such as limited funding and large class sizes, hindered effective reading instruction, apart from community involvement.

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