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Bridging the Silence: Teachers' Lived Experiences of Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experiences of Grade 1-3 teachers of teaching reading to struggling learners at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, a public elementary school in Santa Rosa City, Laguna. This aims to understand how teachers perceive and respond to the challenges and needs of struggling learners in their daily teaching practice. Using phenomenological design under qualitative approach, the study gathered data through in-depth interviews with ten Grade 1-3 teachers using semi-structured interview guide. Interviews focused on teachers' daily practices, challenges, emotional responses, and strategies when teaching reading among struggling learners. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meaningful experiences. Findings revealed that teachers experience responsibility and emotional strain while "bridging the silence" of struggling learners through informal assessments, repetition, one-on-one support, and peer activities despite lacking formal programs. Four key insights emerge: teacher agency (relational warmth + structured pedagogy) drives literacy success; multidimensional reading difficulties demand integrated assessment, multisensory engagement, and emotional support; consistent 10-minute daily drills outperform sporadic high-intensity sessions for fluency/memory retention; and centralized resources like Teacher's Guidebook with Marungko drills and localized scaffolding reduce strain while enabling evidence-based remediation.

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1. Introduction

Consider a Grade 1 classroom in session, where a teacher leans over a learner's desk and carefully models the sounds "a-ba-ka-da" together for the tenth time. Reading is not merely a subject in the curriculum, it is a foundational literacy skill that enables access to every text, every narrative, and every area of learning. It functions as a critical gateway to academic engagement and future opportunities. In contexts such as Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, reading is central to the teaching-learning process, yet many learners continue to struggle with basic word recognition and decoding despite the widespread expansion of technology based tools and contemporary teaching methods.

This struggle is particularly evident in the Philippines, where aspirations for quality education confront persistent systemic challenges. The World Bank reports that 70% of 10 year olds in low and middle income countries are unable comprehend a simple text, an increase from 57% before the COVID 19 pandemic, which led to school closures and significant disruptions in learning [1]. In local settings like Pulong Sta. Cruz, many learners enter Grade 1 without exposure to books or structured language experiences at home, placing them at an immediate disadvantage and widening the gap between policy expectations and classroom reality.

Locally, the Department of Education (DepEd) has invested significant effort into programs such as Bawat Bata Makababasa (BBMP), implemented in elementary schools across Region 9 under DepEd Order DM 033, s. 2025, pairing volunteer tutors with non readers for 20 minute daily reading sessions and expanded nationwide under the broader ARAL initiative. Nevertheless, the 2022 PISA results indicate that Filipino adolescents improved by only 6.8 points from their 2018 score, where the country ranked last (79th out of 79), and performance remains substantially below the OECD average. Learners continue to lag behind the global mean, with difficulties originating in Grade 1, where many cannot blend sounds or follow a short, simple narrative [2], [3].

In Santa Rosa City Division, initiatives like the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) and Project 4Bs highlight the scale of the problem, with Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School recording a struggling learner rate of 63.8% across Grades 1–3. Teachers face overcrowded classrooms, scarce resources, and limited parental support, making early literacy instruction especially challenging. While phonics-based approaches such as Marungko have demonstrated gains in decoding and comprehension prior studies often overlook the lived realities of teachers in resource-constrained settings [4], [5], [6].

This phenomenological qualitative study addresses this crucial gap by exploring the lived experiences of Grade 1–3 teachers at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School as they teach reading to struggling learners.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of primary Grades 1–3 teachers who supported learners facing reading challenges in everyday classroom instruction. The research focuses on the challenges these teachers encounter in addressing decoding hurdles, comprehension gaps, and motivational barriers, while also examining the scaffolding strategies and adaptive practices they apply to build literacy skills. In particular, the following questions guide this study.

Central Question:

1. What are the teachers' lived experiences in teaching reading to struggling learners?

Corollary Questions:

1. What instructional strategies do teachers currently employ to support struggling learners in reading?
2. How does Pulong Sta. Cruz grades 1–3 teachers describe the challenges they face when teaching struggling learners in reading instruction?
3. What practical Teacher's Guide Book can be developed from teachers' lived experiences to enhance reading instruction for struggling learners?

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological design to explore Grades 1-3 teachers lived experiences teaching reading to struggling learners at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, focusing on the essence and meaning of their subjective encounters in Philippine elementary classrooms. Phenomenology prioritizes in-depth descriptions of participants' personal perspectives through semi-structured interviews, uncovering complex educational phenomena that quantitative methods overlook [7]. This approach is aligned with the study's aim to reveal authentic insights into teachers' challenges, adaptive strategies, and emotional dimensions, mirroring recent phenomenological studies of Filipino educators supporting struggling learners.

The study was conducted at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, located in the Division of Santa Rosa City, Laguna. The school is one of the largest public elementary schools in the division, serving a diverse population of learners across multiple grade levels. In the primary grades (Grades 1–3), teachers encounter varying levels of reading proficiency, with a significant number of learners classified as “struggling learners.”

Based on the 2025 CRLA (Comprehensive Reading Level Assessment) results of Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, out of 1,501 learners in Grades 1 to 3, 958 are identified as struggling learners. Among them, 449 learners require a full refresher, 116 needed a moderate refresher, and 393 a light refresher support. To better address their needs, the school combines these struggling learners into specific sections through homogeneous grouping to better address their needs.

This locale represents a typical public-school context where reading instruction challenges and innovations could be meaningfully explored. The school's ongoing literacy programs, such as Project Batang Bumabasa at Bumibilang (4Bs), provide a relevant context for studying teachers' experiences and instructional responses to reading difficulties. The substantial number of struggling learners identified through assessments and their organization into specialized homogeneous sections further validate the appropriateness of this setting for investigating effective reading interventions and teaching experiences.

For this phenomenological study exploring teachers' experiences in teaching reading to struggling learners, ten (10) participants were purposefully selected based on clearly defined criteria to ensure rich and relevant insights. Following Tavakol (2025) recommendation to interview between 5 and 25 participants for phenomenological depth. This number allows adequate exploration of lived experiences while maintaining manageable data.

First, participants have a minimum of two (2) years in teaching experience in public elementary schools, specifically Grades 1 to 3, to guarantee familiarity with the realities and challenges in teaching reading to struggling learners. All selected teachers had direct experience working with struggling readers in this context.

Second, to maintain focus, only teachers specializing in reading instruction or primary education were included, excluding those whose specialization lay outside reading or literacy teaching.

Third, participants are currently assigned to Grades 1 to 3 in Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, where they actively taught struggling learners. All held the designation of Teacher I to Teacher III, matching typical public elementary school ranks.

Fourth, teachers demonstrate a genuine willingness to participate, ensuring they offered candid, rich reflections. The sample includes a balance of teachers from the lower primary grade levels to represent varied experiences within grades 1 to 3.

The researcher approached teachers in the study locale, explained the research purpose, and invited eligible participants based on the above criteria.

This participant selection strategy ensured focused, contextualized data on reading instruction challenges and strategies in a real public-school setting, aligned with phenomenological principles of capturing the depth and detail of teachers' experiences.

For this phenomenological study on teachers lived experiences, a purposeful sampling design was employed, specifically targeting Grades 1-3 teachers at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School. These teachers were selected as primary participants because they have direct, ongoing experience teaching reading to struggling learners, providing a focused and relevant sample for exploring authentic instructional challenges, adaptive strategies, and emotional dimensions through Colaizzi's descriptive method. This method intentionally highlights the rich perspectives of those most immersed in the phenomenon [8]. It ensured the study captured the voices of teachers most familiar with reading intervention realities, enabling context-specific analysis for developing the REIGN LITERACY Teacher's Guidebook.

The research instrument used in gathering the data was semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions as its primary data collection method, aligning with Tavakol and Sandars' phenomenological framework [9]. Participants were asked questions

designed to elicit their lived experiences teaching struggling readers [8]. Drawing from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Philippine literacy challenges, the researcher formulated ten (10) focused questions for phenomenological depth [9].

Three (3) experts were involved in validating the interview questions. They were selected based on their expertise in developing interview instruments and conducting studies employing qualitative research designs. The experts reviewed and verified the validity of the guide questions formulated by the researcher. Following their feedback and recommendations, the researcher revised and refined the items to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

The data gathering for this study involved procedures such as; first the researcher sent a formal letter to the Division Office of Santa Rosa City, Laguna, requesting permission to interview teachers at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School. The researcher also wrote a letter to the school head, for seeking approval to conduct the study and permission to interview qualified teachers assigned in Grade 1-3. To obtain informed consent and determine each participant's most convenient schedule, pre-interview occurred as simple, informal chats to build trust and rapport. During these, open-ended questions inspired by Colaizzi's method gently guided teachers to share their real stories in teaching struggling learners, starting with broad prompts like "How are things in your class" before diving deeper [9].

Before each interview started, the researcher introduced herself, explained the study's purpose capturing Grades 1-3 teachers' journeys with the 958/1501 CRLA-identified struggling learners and ensured participant feel safe and understood. Written informed consent was secured, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy while preserving key details such as grade level in the transcripts.

During the interviews, the researcher used probing questions to encourage participants to elaborate their responses and provided specific examples. This technique helped uncover deeper insights and captured the complexities of their experiences. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription and data analysis. Additionally, the researcher took note to document non-verbal cues and contextual information that may enrich the understanding of the narratives. All data collected follows the standard operating procedures of the study.

The primary objective of this study remains to understand the lived experiences of teachers in teaching reading among struggling learners. To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative research design, and semi-structured interview as the main data gathering method. The researcher conducted interviews with the target participants. The responses undergo for processing, collated, analyze and thematically.

Before the interviews occurred, the set of questions underwent two types of validation; face validation and content validation. In face validation, the validators examined the questionnaire format to ensure that it follows a consistent pattern, appears neat and avoids intimidating participants.

The transcriptions were anonymized to protect the participants' identities and ensured confidentiality. The data remained securely stored, with access limited to the research team. Everything was transcribed within 24 hours while still fresh and the transcriptions were prepared for thematic analysis, where key themes and patterns emerged.

From these talks, themes around challenges, smart strategies, and Teacher's Guide ideas naturally emerged. Continuous reflection kept the analysis closely tied to the research questions and allowed new insights to be explore in depth. This hands-on phenomenological approach gathered raw, heartfelt stories that captured what it felt like for Pulong Sta. Cruz teachers to help struggling learners find their reading spark.

This qualitative study employed Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological framework, a rigorous descriptive method for analyzing teachers' experiences, to investigate Grade 1–3 teachers' encounters in teaching reading to struggling learners at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School. The process began with immersion in the data, where the researcher repeatedly read transcripts to gain familiarity and contextual understanding, a critical step for reducing biases through reflexive bracketing of presuppositions.

Researcher then extracted significant statements from each transcript verbatim, capturing teachers' raw descriptions of challenges, while preserving the essence of their daily realities in homogeneous sections for struggling learners. These statements were formulated into meaningful clusters, grouping emergent ideas such as adaptive phonics scaffolding, peer buddy reads within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, and self-efficacy modeling aligned with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, to reveal interconnected patterns in instructional practices.

This phenomenological study adheres to the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines, emphasizing respect for participants' dignity, autonomy, and diversity while fostering trusting relationships with Grades 1–3 teachers at Pulong Sta [10]. Cruz Elementary School. The researcher secured approval from school administration and relevant educational authorities, obtained written informed consent explaining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and ensured voluntary participation with the right to withdraw anytime without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms, unique codes, and encrypted storage accessible only to the researcher, with all reports omitting identifying information in full compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Data minimization kept interviews non-evaluative and supportive, while personal information was retained only as necessary for analysis and Teacher's Guidebook development, then securely destroyed. Trustworthiness was upheld through these rigorous, transparent measures, safeguarding participants' privacy throughout the exploration of their authentic reading instruction experiences.

3. Results

Table 1. Summary of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Collaborative, Teacher-Led, and Supportive Framework for Reading Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration and Parent Involvement • Teacher as the Primary Instructional Driver • Motivation, Encouragement, and Safe Learning Environment • Explicit and Systematic Instruction • Consistent and Frequent Practice • Remediation and Differentiated Instruction
2. Structured and Differentiated Instructional Strategies to Strengthen Reading Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily Reading Routine on Letter Recognition and Phonemes • Pre-Reading Strategy • Repetition and Fluency-Building Strategies with Instructional Materials • Repeated Reading Paired Reading with Video Assisted and Choral Strategies • Multisensory and Engaging Reading Strategy
3. Data-Driven and Differentiated Instructional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment-Guided Differentiation • Step-by-Step Scaffolding and Explicit Skill

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|--|---|
| <p>Framework for Reading Development</p> | <p>Instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveled and Varied Instructional Materials • One-on-One and Small-Group Support • Flexible Grouping Based on Reading Level |
| <p>4. Systematic and Multisensory Approaches to Foundational Literacy Development</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational Phonics and Sound Mastery • Utilization of the Marungko Approach • Diagnostic and Assessment and Individualized Instruction • Repetition, Scaffolding, and Structured Practice • Game Based Learning and Engagement |
| <p>5. Holistic and Responsive Literacy Instruction Framework</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnostic Assessment as the Starting Point • Parental Involvement and Home Support for Learners with Habitual Absenteeism • Explicit, Systemic Instruction • Modification of Instructional Strategy • Multisensory Approaches to Literacy Instruction • Game Based Learning and Engagement |
| <p>6. Systemic Challenges in Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges of Teachers in Initiating Foundational Literacy for Early Grades • Teacher Dedication Amidst Persistent Reading Challenges • Challenges in Decoding and Word Recognition • Struggling Readers and Early Literacy Barriers • Low Reading Motivation among Learners • Short Attention Span and Emotional • Attendance-Related Barriers to Literacy Development • Environmental Factors that affect Foundational Literacy • Navigating Uncertainty in Early Reading Instruction |
| <p>7. Multidimensional Barriers to Effective Reading Instruction</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of Focus and Limited Home Support • Low Memory Retention • Weak Foundational Reading Skills • Large Class Size Affect Literacy Development • Lack of Memory Retention and Home Support • Phonemic Awareness Challenges and Low Memory Retention • Foundational Reading Challenges: Decoding and Comprehension • Emotional and Behavioral Impact |
| <p>8. Sustained and Adaptive Instructional Commitment in Supporting Struggling Readers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence and Continued Instruction • Parental Communication and Home Follow-Up • Systematic and Individualized Intervention |

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- Reflective Teaching Practice
 - Multisensory and Visual Modification of Strategies
 - Motivation and Confidence-Building
9. Emotional Resilience and Adaptive Commitment in the Face of Instructional Challenges
- Emotional Resilience and Adaptive Strategies
 - Teacher Fulfillment Through Literacy Development
 - Learner Readiness and Lack of Motivation
 - Challenges and Low Memory Retention
 - Navigating Frustration in Supporting Struggling Readers
 - Challenges of Engaging Disinterested Learners and Disruptive Learners
 - Frustration Despite Maximum Effort
 - Behavioral and Classroom Management Challenges
10. Professional Growth, Commitment, and Institutional Support in Literacy Instruction
- Reflective and Adaptive Teaching
 - Passion, Commitment, and Teacher Disposition
 - Ongoing Professional Development
 - Collaboration and Shared Expertise
 - Administrative and Institutional Support
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In this research ten (10) clustered superordinate themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of Grades 1-3 teachers lived experiences teaching reading to struggling learners at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School. These themes capture the multifaceted instructional, challenging, and supportive dimensions shaping reading development.

The identified superordinate themes are: (1) Collaborative, Teacher-Led, and Supportive Framework for Reading Development; (2) Structured and Differentiated Instructional Strategies to Strengthen Reading Development; (3) Data-Driven and Differentiated Instructional Framework for Reading Development; (4) Systematic and Multisensory Approaches to Foundational Literacy Development; (5) Holistic and Responsive Literacy Instruction Framework; (6) Systemic Challenges in Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners; (7) Multidimensional Barriers to Effective Reading Instruction; (8) Sustained and Adaptive Instructional Commitment in Supporting Struggling Readers; (9) Emotional Resilience and Adaptive Commitment in the Face of Instructional Challenges; and (10) Professional Growth, Commitment, and Institutional Support in Literacy Instruction.

4. Discussion

One The data analysis revealed key findings that directly address the research problems, offering valuable insights into Grades 1-3 teachers' lived experiences of teaching reading to struggling learners at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School, including their instructional strategies, systemic challenges, emotional resilience, and commitment to foundational literacy development.

Theme 1: Collaborative, Teacher-Led Framework for Reading Development

The first theme revealed the voices of the struggling teachers that a multifaceted approach supporting struggling learners in early grades, rooted in heartfelt commitment and practical classroom realities. This underscores the teacher's proactive role in early identification of needs and forging parent-teacher connections, viewing parental follow-up as pivotal yet often lacking, which transforms reading instruction into a collaborative

ecosystem rather than a solitary endeavor. This echoes one of the teacher responses emphasize on parent collaboration alongside motivation to spark daily school interest. Complementing this, some of the teachers highlight fostering a safe, encouraging environment through rewards, play-based remediation, one-on-one sessions, and anti-teasing norms, positioning emotional security as the bedrock for risk-taking in reading. And also advocate explicit, systematic strategies modeling, phonics breakdown, scaffolding, frequent repetition, and leveled grouping ensuring skills like decoding are built incrementally with consistent practice, teacher asserts that daily exposure trumps sporadic teaching. Collectively, these narratives portray the teacher as both architect and nurturer, blending relational warmth with structured pedagogy to bridge literacy gaps.

This unveils consistent thematic convergence on teacher agency as the primary driver of reading interventions, with parental involvement emerging as a critical yet inconsistent enabler, aligning with Arguido et al.'s application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in Philippine elementary schools through the ARAL Program, where scaffolded teacher guidance addresses proximal development gaps despite inconsistent home support [11]. The dominance of explicit instruction, remediation, and motivation mirrors Utto and Lumogdang's findings on frustrated readers, where sociocultural scaffolding through small-grouping and play-based strategies fosters persistence amid cultural and systemic barriers [12]. Differentiated practices like daily repetition and leveled reading, alongside safe classroom environments, echo the grounded theory insights of recent Philippine studies emphasizing social mediation for reading culture development, though resource gaps amplify teachers' improvisational burden as seen in ARAL program challenges.

Theme 2: Structured, Differentiated Strategies for Reading Development

The second theme emerged numerous effective daily routines for improving reading fluency among struggling learners. The sub-ordinate theme Reading Routine as Foundation highlights consistent basics like letter-sound drills and pre - reading. strategy. Teacher responses emphasized revisiting letter sound daily "pa-ulit-ulit" through dedicated one hour pre-reading strategy to cultivate smooth word recognition and strengthen foundation reading skills prior to the class discussions. Monitoring and Individualized Support involves targeted one-on-one sessions, rotating students daily through writing and readings checks to identify specific weaknesses and improvements. Teachers apply Repetition and Fluency Building strategies that engage into short reading practices with 5–10-minute passages using instructional materials and guided oral drills for accuracy and speed. Peer Supported and Collaborative Reading leverages, proficient peers through paired/buddy reading and choral activities. Teachers further added the utilization of Multisensory and Engaging Reading Strategy that incorporates videos songs, and body movements embedded for retention and motivation.

This suggests that routine-based instruction combines repetition, individualized instruction, collaboration and engagement to scaffolding fluency are all a ladder to reading success. Additionally, learners' needs for automaticity indicate structured daily practice validated by Collins et al. [13]. Their evidence-based review demonstrated that repeated reading interventions significantly boost oral reading fluency rates which are measured in words correct per minute for elementary learners. They are at risk for reading difficulties, often overlapping with emotional/behavioral challenges in early grades like 1-3. Peer tutoring enhances cooperative fluency as Ramos confirmed fixed/ reciprocal models boosted phonemic awareness in public elementary learners [14]. Multisensory Reading Strategy addresses diverse needs, with Kilat and Apas reported excellent first grade phonemic and fluency outcomes through visual, auditory and kinesthetic routines [15].

Theme 3: Data-Driven, Differentiated Framework for Reading Development

The third theme demonstrated a unified commitment to assessment-guided differentiation as the foundation of reading support for struggling learners. Teachers

consistently emphasize initial and ongoing assessments to pinpoint each child's reading level and track progress, using phonics tasks and flexible grouping to ensure targeted instruction. Flexible grouping emerges prominently across responses, with leveled readers, Marungko approach mastery, and one-on-one tutorials preventing overwhelm while matching materials to abilities. Step-by-step scaffolding builds foundational skills incrementally through explicit modeling, repetition, and remedial exercises, while hands-on activities and progress monitoring enable continuous adaptation to diverse learner needs.

These findings reveal elementary teachers' adaptive expertise in differentiated instruction despite resource constraints, aligning with Vaughn et al.'s RTI framework where small-group interventions for Grade 1-3 strugglers yielded moderate effect sizes through leveled materials and progress monitoring [16]. The dominance of flexible grouping and one-on-one support mirrors Arguido et al.'s ARAL Program success, where assessment-driven scaffolding in public schools achieved decoding gains via culturally relevant phonics and leveled texts [11]. Teachers' universal improvisation of materials underscores systemic gaps but highlights resilience, validating the need for policy support in professional development for explicit, data-responsive reading interventions.

Theme 4: Systematic, Multisensory Approaches for Foundational Literacy

The fourth theme observed some of instructional steps, procedures, and targeted interventions that have been helpful in teaching reading to struggling learners. Teachers pointed out the importance of beginning with diagnostic assessment to determine learners' specific reading difficulties, followed by the use of explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies which they believe a good instructional step or procedure in enhancing the foundational skills of the struggling readers.

Furthermore, many participants highlighted the effectiveness of scaffolding techniques, as targeted interventions where complex reading tasks are broken down into manageable components for learners' better understanding. This is aligned with the study by Alexis N. Boucher et al., "Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 3–12 With Significant Word Reading Difficulties," which emphasized structured and scaffolded interventions as critical in improving reading outcomes among struggling learners [17].

In addition, teachers reported employing repeated reading, guided reading sessions, and reading aloud strategies to improve fluency and comprehension. These practices are supported by Joana Cruz et al. in their study "Fluency Training for Struggling Readers: Examining the Effects of a Tier-2 Intervention in Third Graders," which found that targeted fluency interventions significantly improve reading performance and learner motivation.

On the other hand, Reading teachers also find Marungko Approach helpful in teaching Reading to the struggling learners. This method of teaching progresses, from basic to complex task like from letter-sounds and picture associations to syllables, words and phrases and has been very productive to early grade learners relative to their improved reading performance. This was validated by Dela Cruz and Reyes in their study, "A Review of Marungko Approach in Early Grade Reading Instruction" where its findings showed that learners exposed to the Marungko Approach demonstrate improved reading performance, including phonemic awareness, decoding, and oral reading skills [18].

The steps or procedures and applied interventions mentioned above and shared by the teachers underscore the effectiveness of complementary methods or supporting strategies that work alongside primary methods to reinforce learning from different angles, feature diagnostic assessments, explicit phonics with scaffolding, multisensory activities, and engaging formats like interactive games and small groups.

Theme 5: Holistic, Responsive Literacy Framework

This fifth theme addressed reading challenges by beginning with diagnostic assessment to know the learners reading level, identify their strengths and weaknesses and provide what reading materials or approach to use that would address the learner needs. Informing and involving parents, providing home follow-ups, and parental counselling especially to those learners with habitual absenteeism, strengthen reinforcement beyond the classroom. And also, teachers while on the verge of teaching, adopt explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies. They also utilize multi-sensory approaches to literacy instruction to enhance learning, reading comprehension and memory retention of struggling learners like the use of interactive games, tactile activities, phonic songs. Moreover, teachers also employ modifications of instructional strategy depending on the learners' needs. . They may also utilize flexible strategies or tailored approach like small groupings rotation for targeted phonics drills, buddy pairing for peer-supported retelling or one-on-one tasks with leveled texts helps teachers target gaps in decoding and comprehension, while encouraging for positive environment that builds learners confidence and reduces reading anxiety.

This indicate the effective reading interventions combined with diagnostic assessment, explicit and systematic instruction, muti-sensory approaches, modifications in instructional strategies and motivational home support. The Assessment as the starting point allows reading teachers to pinpoint the learning gaps and apply targeted interventions [19]. Explicit and systematic instruction develop a step-by-step mastery of decoding, fluency and comprehension skills highlighted by Foorman & Torgesen. Implementing multisensory approaches to literacy instruction is consistent with recent studies recognizing that students process information through different sensory pathways and, therefore, tailors instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs [20].

Theme 6: Systemic Challenges in Teaching Reading to Struggling Learners

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Theme 7: Multidimensional Barriers to Effective Reading Instruction

The seventh theme uncovers several barriers encountered by Grade 1-3 teachers in teaching reading to struggling learners. Many of these are 1) the low memory retention which is identified as the common challenge, as learners often or easily forget previously learned letters, sounds, syllables or words despite repeated instruction. Another challenge identified is 2) the limited parental follow-up and home support, implying that some learners receive little or less reinforcement of reading skills outside the classroom. Additionally, 3) weak foundational reading skills, particularly in letter name recognition and sound blending are also observed among struggling learners. Some other factors such as class sizes and diverse learner abilities also further limit teachers' capacity to provide individualized instruction. Moreover, teachers noted that the emotional and behavioral impact of these challenges, including learners' frustration and reduced confidence during reading activities.

In line with these experiences of the teachers, Rodulfo supported them in his study, entitled: "Effectiveness of SQ3R in Improving the Level of Reading Comprehension of Grade 3 Learners" where he mentioned that struggling learners often experience difficulty in comprehension and require consistent instructional support to improve their reading performance.

The faced difficulties of teachers highlights that barriers to effective reading instruction are multidimensional, involving learner-related, home and classroom-related factors. Retention and memory indicate that struggling learners require repeated exposure and guided practice to strengthen foundational reading skills. This supports the study of Valencia, that "Reading in Tandem" program demonstrates structured peer assisted reading significantly improved struggling learners reading levels through guided interaction and continuous practice [21].

These highlighted barriers to effective reading instruction align with Yapao-Alcantara and Ducot, who emphasized that addressing reading difficulties requires collaborative efforts through effective instructional strategies, parental involvement, and structured intervention programs to support struggling learners' literacy development [22]. These insights underscore the need for integrated, multi-faceted approaches in primary education to empower teachers, families, and peers in bridging literacy gaps.

Theme 8: Sustained, Adaptive Instructional Commitment

The eighth theme revealed common strategies for addressing struggling readers, particularly in early literacy skills like phonics, decoding, and comprehension. Five subordinate themes emerged from qualitative analysis. Persistence and Continued Instruction. Parental Communication and Home Follow-Up, Systematic and Individualized Intervention, Reflective Teaching Practice, Multisensory and Visual Modification of Strategies, and Motivation and Confidence-Build. These reflect adaptive, learner-centered practices grounded in everyday classroom challenges, such as limited parental involvement and diverse student needs.

This indicates that supporting struggling learners in reading requires continuous, adaptive interventions [23]. Individualized interventions scaffold foundational skills while reflective Practice ensures strategies are adjusted to learners' needs through reflective teaching approaches [24]. Visual and multisensory modifications make learning concrete

and engaging, while motivation-focused strategies reduce anxiety and increase participation.

Theme 9: Emotional Resilience and Adaptive Commitment

The ninth theme revealed that several experienced challenges tested their patience while teaching reading to struggling learners. The sub-ordinate Frustration despite maximum effort, emerged as a recurring theme, wherein teachers sometimes get frustrated that after having been given their all in teaching Reading to struggling learners, still learners failed to retain and recall previously taught lesson in Reading even after repeated instructions. Teachers also mentioned issues related to learner readiness and motivation, noting that some learners were unwilling, no interest to participate, easily distracted or even lacked of confidence in their reading abilities. The behavioral and classroom management challenges further complicated instruction, especially those disinterested or disruptive learners who are also called as “Red Flag”. On the other hand, those learners from Grades 1-3 with special needs really required additional guidance to stay engaged and motivated. Despite these concerns, teachers still showed their emotional resilience and fulfillment by highlighting the importance of celebrating small achievements and incremental progress, demonstrating that compassion, patience and consistent support matters in fostering struggling learners’ engagement and confidence in learning reading.

The challenges that Reading Teachers experienced is supported by the study of Erin K. Washburn and Abby Pierce titled “Teaching Older Struggling Readers: Novice 4–12th General and Special Education Teachers’ Knowledge of Foundational Reading Skills,” which highlights that teachers’ strong understanding of foundational reading skills is essential for addressing learners’ difficulties effectively.

These suggest that teaching reading to struggling learners involves several combined factors, including learner and teacher characteristics, classroom environment and instructional strategies. Learners’ difficulties in retention and foundational reading skills indicate the need for repeated practice, guided support, and adaptive scaffolding. Doromal validates this perspective through a phenomenological study of Filipino teachers implementing scaffolded intensive reading, where repeated practice via structured steps like previewing, guided questioning, and multimedia reinforcement directly addresses retention gaps and foundational deficits in struggling learners [25]. Challenges in learner motivation and readiness emphasize the importance of increment success or step-by-step successes and engagement strategies.

Furthermore, Villanueva supported this, showing that structured phonics coupled with small, measurable progress enhances learners’ confidence and willingness to get involved [5]. Behavioral and classroom management challenges highlight teachers’ need for emotional resilience and adaptive strategies. Sarmiento-Campos et al. on the other hand, argued that scaffolding within Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) allows teachers to support learners with individualized instruction, helping struggling learners develop literacy skills and self-efficacy [26]. These multidimensional challenges call for holistic, evidence-based interventions that integrate teacher resilience, collaborative support systems, and tailored scaffolding to transform reading instruction and empower struggling learners in Philippine primary classrooms.

Theme 10: Professional Growth, Commitment, and Institutional Support

The tenth theme demonstrated a unified commitment to assessment-guided differentiation as the foundation of reading support for struggling learners. Teachers consistently emphasize initial and ongoing assessments to pinpoint each child’s reading level and track progress, using phonics tasks and flexible grouping to ensure targeted instruction. Flexible grouping emerges prominently across response, with leveled readers, Marungko approach mastery, and one-on-one tutorials preventing overwhelm while matching materials to abilities. Step-by-step scaffolding builds foundational skills incrementally through explicit modeling, repetition, and remedial exercises, while hands-

on activities and progress monitoring enable continuous adaptation to diverse learner needs.

These findings reveal elementary teachers' adaptive expertise in differentiated instruction despite resource constraints, aligning with Vaughn et al.'s RTI framework where small-group interventions for Grade 1-3 strugglers yielded moderate effect sizes through leveled materials and progress monitoring [16]. The dominance of flexible grouping and one-on-one support mirrors Arguido et al.'s ARAL Program success, where assessment-driven scaffolding achieved decoding gains via culturally relevant phonics directly paralleling your teachers' Marungko approach and leveled readers [11]. This improvisation of materials also echoes Saquing's Marungko intervention, transforming Kindergarten strugglers from "Poor" (0-1 sounds) to 74.51% "Excellent" initial sound identification using the existing CRLA assessment, validating teachers' resilience amid shortages. Andaya & Tepacia's Negros Oriental scaffolding strategies further confirm high implementation (M=4.22) of flexible grouping, silent reading, and word games in large classes, achieving "Very high" learner satisfaction despite limited support precisely matching Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary realities [27].

5. Conclusion

The following are the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study, the lived experiences of Grade 1-3 teachers of teaching reading to struggling learners.

- a. Grades 1-3 teachers at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School demonstrate dedication and adaptive expertise, driving struggling learners' literacy success despite overcrowding, inconsistent parental support, and resource gaps. They blend "relational warmth" with structured methods, building emotional confidence and decoding skills. This integrated approach affirms teacher intervention as the most vital and transformative force within the literacy ecosystem, effectively bridging persistent gaps in challenging Philippine public school contexts.
- b. Reading difficulties at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School exceed cognitive gaps like low memory retention, intensified by external factors such as adverse home environments, large classes, limited materials, and minimal parental involvement. Effective remediation rejects "one-size-fits-all" methods, instead integrating diagnostic assessments, multisensory engagement, and emotional support from teachers' four instructional themes. This comprehensive strategy ensures sustainable success in decoding, word recognition, comprehension, and affective domains across diverse Philippine classrooms.
- c. Short, daily "routine-based" interventions like 10-minute pa-ulit-ulit drills and Marungko phonics outperform sporadic high-intensity sessions for memory retention in struggling learners, using spaced repetition to counter forgetting of sounds and syllables. Rooted in the foundational drills theme, this builds stronger neural pathways. Meanwhile, fostering a "culture of reading" through small, celebrated achievements like mastering a blend or buddy reads sustainably boosts motivation and long-term fluency in decoding, word recognition, and comprehension within resource-limited Philippine classrooms.
- d. Grades 1-3 teachers' lived experiences at Pulong Sta. Cruz Elementary School reveal that the proposed REIGN LITERACY Teacher's Guide Book is essential to reduce burnout and "trial-and-error" instruction amid large classes and weak parental support. It offers pre-structured Marungko drills, ZPD templates, progress tools, and home-school guides from proven practices. This empowers consistent, evidence-based remediation with less prep, scaling literacy gains while sustaining teacher efficacy in Philippine public schools.

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