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Original Article

Status of Learners in Numeracy and Reading Literacy: Examining Their Performance and Challenges with Words and Numbers

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Abstract. The ability to read and count is a crucial skill that students today must develop. Failure to develop these skills results in poor functioning in the society in which they live. This study aimed to capture the reading and numeracy struggles and gaps of students in a public school in the Philippines. Specifically, it examines the gap between students' reading and numeracy challenges and the expected proficiency levels as measured by the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHIL-IRI). A mixed-methods design using a parallel-convergence approach was employed to collect and analyze the data. The quantitative data were obtained using the documentary method from the PHIL-IRI results. In contrast, the qualitative data were gathered through an in-depth interview with the purposefully selected eight (8) participants. These participants demonstrated difficulties in both reading and numeracy, as indicated by PHILI-IRI results. The responses were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis of the findings reveals that 30 students are at the frustration level in reading literacy, whereas the same number are at the intervention level in numeracy. The data shows that several students have poor reading and numeracy skills. The qualitative analysis also reveals students' weak foundations in reading and numeracy. This gap has also hindered their development of other micro-competencies, including comprehension, pronunciation, and basic arithmetic operations. Despite these difficulties, they demonstrate strong self-motivation and perseverance, supported by friends, teachers, and family members, particularly their parents. This situation may hinder their ability to function in the future, leading to unemployment. Strengthening early literacy and numeracy instruction, improving remedial programs, and promoting family involvement can help students build confidence and achieve better learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Literacy and numeracy; Lived experiences; Mixed-method design; Self-motivation and external support; Students' struggle.*

Reading and numeracy are the two essential skills necessary for success in the modern world. High literacy and numerical proficiency are essential for both successful learning outcomes and high-quality education (Minoza et al., 2025). The ability to read and do mathematics is a fundamental tool that students need for their success in school and beyond. However, many Filipino learners, particularly in junior high school, struggle

to develop proficiency in these areas. Students in a public high school had difficulties in reading and math. These issues not only hinder their understanding and problem-solving abilities but also undermine their self-esteem. According to the PISA 2022 results, students in the Philippines did not achieve the OECD average in mathematics and reading. The Philippines ranked 77th among 81 participating nations (OECD, 2023). Additionally, the Philippines ranked lowest among Southeast Asian countries (Minoza et al., 2025).

Moreover, this decline in reading and numeracy skills is reflected in the recent 2022 PISA results, which indicate that, among Southeast Asian nations, the Philippines ranked last (Minoza et al., 2025). It demonstrates that the Philippines is one of the countries with the lowest levels of math and reading skills. Furthermore, Acido et al. (2023) revealed that Filipino students continue to rank among the least skilled in reading and numeracy worldwide. The 2018 assessment showed no significant improvement in their performance. This means that, despite ongoing educational reforms and initiatives, critical gaps in foundational skills persist and must be urgently addressed to enhance learning outcomes and future opportunities for Filipino students.

Within this framework, it becomes essential to understand the root causes of students' struggles in reading and numeracy, as well as the factors that sustain their motivation to learn despite these difficulties. This study, therefore, sought to examine the reading and numeracy struggles encountered by public secondary school students, explore motivational factors that help them persevere, and discover the influence of parents' involvement in their learning experiences. By doing so, the research aimed to contribute to strategies that strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy skills and promote greater academic confidence among learners.

Methodology

Research Design

The researchers used a mixed-methods design to examine in depth the personal and collective experiences of public-school secondary students regarding their reading and numeracy difficulties. According to Sharma et al. (2023), a mixed-methods research design is a complex strategy that integrates quantitative and qualitative data within a single study or across a series of studies. This approach is beneficial for investigating complex research problems that cannot be fully addressed with a single study design. The researchers also used PHIL-IRI results obtained from the Registrar's Office to quantitatively assess students' reading proficiency and numeracy, thereby complementing the qualitative insights with measurable data.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study's participants are presently enrolled in a public secondary school. Based on the PHIL-IRI scores for the school year 2025–2026, thirty (30) pupils who demonstrated reading and numeracy challenges are included in the quantitative statistics. Furthermore, based on the PHILI-IRI results, eight (8) purposively selected students—four (4) males and four (4) females—who demonstrated challenges in reading and numeracy were interviewed in depth.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used a semi-structured questionnaire. Semi-structured questionnaires include both closed- and open-ended questions, providing flexibility and depth while complicating data analysis (Khan et al., 2024). It allows respondents to respond more freely and on their own terms, with no constraints on their answers (Ranganatan et al., 2023). The research instructor reviewed the instrument to ensure that the questions were clear and accurate for the students.

Data Gathering Procedure

The semi-structured interview was primarily used for data collection, providing students with the freedom to discuss on their own terms and at their own pace. A semi-structured interview is a data collection strategy in which questions are guided by a predetermined topic framework (George, 2023). Their individual lived experiences with reading and numeracy skills, the particular challenges they encountered, and the coping mechanisms they used were the main topic of the interview. To learn more about students' lived experiences and perspectives on their academic difficulties, one-on-one interviews were conducted. In her study, Johnson (2023) defined lived experience as personal knowledge of the world derived from direct, firsthand experience of real-life events, rather than from representations made by others. It is also a form of knowledge about people obtained through face-to-face communication rather than through technology. The participants' answers were recorded and checked for accuracy with their consent. Moreover, the researchers collected PHIL-IRI and math assessment

scores to evaluate students' performance in reading and numeracy quantitatively.

Data Analysis Procedure

The information was collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, and the responses were analyzed thematically. The interview recordings were encoded, translated, and examined to understand the students' experiences. Important responses regarding the challenges in reading and numeracy were emphasized and clustered into common themes. To verify validity, the researchers employed member checking by comparing the participants' responses with their own. The research instructor assessed the analysis to ensure accuracy and consistency. Through this process, the researchers ensured that the results accurately reflect students' experiences and challenges in reading and numeracy.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained approval from the school administration before conducting the study and obtained consent from the respondents. The study's goal was clearly explained to the students, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary. At any time, they may choose to join or withdraw without adverse effects. All data collected from the interviews were secured. The student's profile was hidden for confidentiality. The collected information was used solely for research purposes and was handled with due care and consideration. The interviews were conducted in a safe environment, ensuring that every respondent felt heard and respected throughout the process.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Results

Table 1 shows the reading score of thirty (30) respondents according to PHIL-IRI results. The table indicates that all students are at the frustration level in reading, with a weighted mean of 1.00. This implies that they find it hard to read and comprehend basic passages. They are unable to work independently and, most of the time, require guidance from the teacher to make sense of the text. The findings indicate that word decoding, vocabulary identification, and meaning recognition are complex for the respondents. In general, the data suggest a significant reading challenge among students, underscoring the urgent need for targeted reading interventions.

Table 1. *Students' Reading Performance Based on Phil-IRI Results (N=30)*

Reading Level	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Weighted value
Frustration (1)	1-15	30	100%	30
Instructional (2)	16-27	0	0	0
Independent (3)	**28-40**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Total		**30**	**100%**	**30**
Weighted Mean				**1.0 (Frustration Level)**

Weighted Mean Range	Interpretation
2.50-3.00	Independent (Can read and comprehend independently.)
1.75-2.49	Instructional (Can read, with help; guided practice is needed.)
1.00-1.74	Frustration (Difficulty in reading text, even with support.)

In Namol et al. (2024), learners' reading proficiency, as measured by both word-reading and comprehension scores, was at the frustration level. According to Alacida et al. (2025), students today exhibit diminished academic focus due to excessive engagement with e-games. This has been identified today as one of the factors predicting students' academic decline. In addition, the study by Jesus et al. (2025) identified significant gaps in reading comprehension, which were attributed to several factors, including teaching methods, exposure to the language, socioeconomic status, and limited access to reading materials. Ampo (2023) emphasized that the Philippine government implements various programs at the basic education level to ensure that quality education reaches Filipino students with learning needs, particularly in core subjects, including reading. Additionally, according to Santillan (2023), evidence-based intervention strategies improve literacy outcomes and contribute to the holistic development of communities.

The reading gap in education is a significant issue that the education system should address, as poor reading skills lead to societal dysfunction, particularly in the era of globalization. It is essential to remember that even if some students continue to struggle with reading, interventions remain necessary to address this systemic gap effectively. By focusing on the needs of struggling readers, one can provide them with the resources to build their knowledge base and engage in the learning process.

Table 2. *Students' Numeracy Performance Based on Phil-IRI Results (N=30)*

Numeracy Level	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Weighted Value
Intervention (1)	1-4	30	100%	30
Consolidation (2)	5-7	0	0	0
Enhancement (3)	**8-10**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Total		**30**	**100%**	**30**
Weighted Mean				**1.0 (Intervention Level)**

Weighted Mean Range	Interpretation
2.50-3.00	Enhancement (High Numeracy)
1.75-2.49	Consolidation (Moderate Numeracy)
1.00-1.74	Intervention (Low Numeracy)

Table 2 presents a summary of students' numeracy performance based on PHIL-IRI results. The table shows that all students are at the intervention level, with a weighted mean of 1.00. This implies that students are struggling with simple numerical problems and need urgent remediation. They frequently require step-by-step support because they have difficulties with basic numeracy skills, such as operations. The findings indicate that numeracy is another significant area of concern. Similarly to reading, students require structured, consistent, and targeted instructional support to improve their numeracy skills.

According to Igarashi et al. (2023), students' foundational numeracy skills declined significantly. Likewise, Ampo (2022) found that most students received poor ratings across most subject areas, including mathematics, in a study of National Achievement Test results at a public school in the Philippines. According to Geniston et al. (2024), students performed below average on basic numeracy operations. According to Geniston et al. (2024), students performed below average on basic numeracy operations. Low attendance, lack of passion, and prior knowledge are the leading causes of low numeracy levels, which negatively impact the students' performance. At the same time, Isnurani et al. (2023) found that students' numeracy skills were low at a junior high school in Indonesia.

The studies cited indicate the predictability of factors contributing to poor mathematics literacy among students. Nevertheless, the education system must address the increase in the number of students who fall below an acceptable performance level on national standardized assessments, as this threatens their future learning development. The impact of poor numeracy can be far-reaching and long-term, affecting not only educational success but also lifelong welfare and financial security. Enhancing numeracy is essential for promoting academic achievement and general well-being.

Qualitative Results

Weak Foundation in Basic Literacy and Numeracy Skills

Students' weak foundation in basic literacy, such as reading and numeracy, creates a gap between educational success and their actual performance in learning. The development of these fundamental abilities by students is vital, as it underpins everything they will learn as they progress both professionally and personally. Students who have difficulty recognizing letters, reading simple words, and comprehending brief texts, as well as identifying numbers, discerning number relationships, and performing simple arithmetic operations, are more likely to struggle than those who can read and count at their level. The analysis of the coded data indicated that students who cannot read or count have weak foundations in both reading and numeracy.

"I read slowly, I have difficulty with reading comprehension, and I struggle with multiplication."

"I read slowly because I find reading difficult. I also find it difficult to divide in math."

The responses of Participants A and B indicate difficulty reading and performing math simultaneously. The responses indicate that when students encounter difficulties with basic reading skills, this also results in poor learning of mathematics, as English is the medium of instruction. A weak foundation of both reading and numeracy skills will lag behind students' academic development. Multiple recent studies, including those on secondary school students in the Philippines and internationally, emphasize persistent gaps in foundational skills critical to academic success. According to Ghosh (2021), in India, students' foundational literacy and numeracy remain low despite increased school enrollment. A study by Zamudio (2023) conducted at Paracales National High School found that many junior high students experienced frustration with reading, suggesting that a significant number had not acquired basic reading skills before entering secondary school. In addition, Catador et al. (2024) found numerous numeracy gaps among junior high students of Filipino descent, with many having

difficulties with basic arithmetic operations and word problems, which affect their academic development.

According to Figuerres (2025), reading is a significant challenge for students at a public high school in the Philippines, particularly in literacy and comprehension. In addition, Jabanes et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of integrating literacy and numeracy in the early stages of education to improve overall academic outcomes and cognitive development. To create a more inclusive and effective learning process, it also highlighted how mother-tongue and multilingual education interventions enabled students to master mathematical concepts and other literacy skills. A weak foundation in basic literacy and numeracy skills poses serious problems for students as they advance through the education system. It reduces their capacity to learn and engage with more complex topics, resulting in poor performance and diminished self-confidence. This gap can easily lead to frustration and disengagement, making it difficult for students to keep up with their peers. In the long term, these struggles extend beyond the classroom to prospects for higher education and future employment, and lead to cycles of disadvantage that affect personal and social well-being. It should prioritize students with weak foundational skills to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities and long-term success.

Self-Motivation and External Support

In reading and numeracy, students need self-motivation to engage in learning. It is the inner engine that keeps them practicing reading or solving math problems, even when it is challenging. External support comprises the resources, assistance, and encouragement that students receive from teachers, parents, and peers. Effective learning in reading and numeracy often results from a combination of self-motivation and external support. This theme, *Self-Motivation and External Support,* emerged from the research question, "What helps them keep trying when reading and numeracy feel difficult?" The question aimed to discover what keeps students motivated to continue learning even when reading and numeracy tasks feel difficult. The participants' responses are focused on self-motivation and external support. This theme emerged because participants described their efforts and persistence in improving their skills despite the challenges they faced.

"I try my best to read. I ask for help from my classmates, mother, and sister."

"I still attend school, even though I find it difficult to read and solve math problems."

Participant B shows determination and seeks assistance from classmates or family members. On the other hand, Participant G highlighted that, despite some difficulties with reading and mathematics, he continues to attend school. It is an expression of perseverance and a willingness to learn, even when tasks are complex. The responses reveal that students with low literacy and numeracy levels rely on self-motivation and external resources, such as family, peers, or individuals willing to assist them in further learning. Both self-motivation and external support are vital to students' academic development and progress. Effective academic growth depends on a combination of high levels of internalization and self-motivation and a sound system of external academic support that helps students perform well cognitively and socially.

These responses indicate that perseverance and peer and family support greatly help students remain motivated. As McLeod (2025) notes in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, learners develop motivation and confidence through social interaction and observation. Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that self-determination arises when individuals feel competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The fundamental desire to study, combined with emotional and social support from others, is vital to students' achievement of their learning goals. Furthermore, Ummi's (2021) study found that academic self-concept combined with parental social support had a considerable impact on learning motivation.

Furthermore, Gino (2023) stated that parental involvement is significant for pupils' reading performance. Parents who were actively involved in the reading activities at home, reading together, and providing reading material to their children, in addition to the creation of a reading-friendly environment, played a significant role in helping their children develop their reading skills. The study by Iballa et al. (2025) demonstrates that although teachers experience burnout, isolation, and a reduced sense of control, they are also motivated when they observe their students' growth and continued learning.

The combined effect of self-motivation and external support enhances students' ability to remain deeply engaged in the learning process, to the point of perseverance and a proactive approach to challenges. Students are more

likely to perform better academically when they feel confident and supported, resulting in greater academic achievement and personal growth. Teachers, peers, and family reinforcement through external encouragement bolster self-belief and commitment in a dynamic process that sustains motivation over the long term. This compromise would provide students with flexibility while guiding them toward meeting educational expectations, resulting in more meaningful and memorable learning experiences.

Learning Ignited Through Parental Motivation

Parental motivation is a significant factor in determining a learner's academic outcomes. Children become more confident and interested in their studies when their parents are encouraging, guiding, and providing emotional support. This theme, *Learning Ignited Through Parental Motivation*, posits that parental motivation serves as a catalyst that helps learners remain motivated, address challenges, and appreciate their education. Understanding the effects of parental motivation on students' educational behavior demonstrates that parents should be more than merely observers of their children's learning development. This theme, *Learning Ignited Through Parental Motivation*, emerged from the research question, "How does parental involvement impact young learners' motivation to improve reading and numeracy skills?" The participants' responses emphasize learning that is ignited by parental motivation. This issue emerged because many participants stated that their parents play a vital role in their education.

"*My mother teaches me, that is why I am motivated to learn.*"
"*My mother teaches me how to read and solve, that is why I already know how to read a little.*"

Participants C and H reported that their mothers are central to their learning. When their mothers teach them at home, they become happier, more encouraged, and more motivated. It is this emotional support that motivates them to study despite the difficulty of the classes. The participants' responses indicate that parental involvement is a significant motivator and academic facilitator. This means that parental motivation plays a vital role in igniting and sustaining students' learning by providing encouragement and essential emotional support. That involvement in the educational process can compensate for reading and numeracy difficulties and provide students with the confidence to continue studying.

According to the participants' responses, family monitoring increases motivation, discipline, and a positive learning attitude. According to Leander et al. (2020), parental involvement is critical to improving students' academic progress, particularly for those who received lower grades. Internationally, Maagad et al. (2025) discovered that students learn more when their parents are actively involved. Furthermore, Clapis et al. (2025) found that high levels of parental involvement and student engagement were strongly associated with academic success, particularly in reading performance. Furthermore, Escol et al. (2025) found that parental participation affects students' academic achievement. Parental involvement strengthens students' motivation and commitment to learning, resulting in improved academic performance and higher achievement. It cultivates a supportive environment that promotes emotional health and social skills, thereby increasing students' interest. Parental involvement fosters trust and cooperation, which positively affect students' attitudes toward school and learning. It will establish a foundation for lifelong learning and personal development.

Conclusion

The study's findings contribute to a better understanding of the reading and numeracy challenges experienced by students at a public school in the Philippines by integrating quantitative performance data with qualitative lived experiences. The findings underscore that literacy and numeracy challenges are not limited to a single academic problem but are strongly linked to students' motivation and feelings, as well as the support they receive at home. The study emphasizes the importance of self-motivation and strong family support in sustaining students' learning, particularly among those with weak foundational skills. These findings underscore the need for schools to enhance early interventions, provide more flexible remediations, and establish a learning environment that fosters confidence and competence. To ensure continued support outside the classroom, schools may consider developing structured literacy and numeracy models, providing teacher training in differentiated instruction, and strengthening collaboration with parents. The results support recommendations for a more effective evaluation system and specific intervention programs for students who continue to experience frustration and require intervention. Future research may elaborate on the long-term effects of homeschool cooperation, evaluate alternative intervention methods, or examine the role of motivational factors in students' improvement over time. By addressing these gaps, future research may build on these findings and contribute to the development of

comprehensive, practical strategies to improve students' reading and numeracy achievement in public secondary schools.

Contributions of Authors

The researchers indicate an equal contribution to each section of this research. All authors evaluated and approved the final version of this article.

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Conflict of Interests

We declared that we have no conflicts of interest with this study.

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