

Original Article

Teachers' Experiences in Addressing Low Reading Literacy in At-Risk Communities

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Abstract. Low reading literacy remains a persistent educational challenge, particularly among learners in at-risk communities where socioeconomic, linguistic, and resource-related barriers constrain literacy development. While existing research has largely focused on literacy outcomes and intervention effectiveness, limited attention has been given to teachers' experiences in addressing literacy challenges across diverse educational contexts. Guided by Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory, this study explored teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities in the Philippines and the United States. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight (28) teachers from public, private, and international educational settings. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Thematic analysis revealed five major challenges, five coping strategies, four teacher perceptions, and four contextual variations that characterize teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy. Teachers identified limited home literacy exposure, low learner engagement, language-related barriers, diverse reading abilities, and systemic resource constraints as key challenges. In response, they employed differentiated instruction, structured literacy support, contextualized learning activities, collaboration with families and communities, and continuous instructional adaptation. Despite differences in social, cultural, and geographical contexts, teachers consistently demonstrated resilience, professional commitment, and a shared dedication to improving learners' literacy outcomes. The findings suggest that the interaction of classroom practices, environmental conditions, and broader social inequities shapes literacy development.

Keywords: *At-risk communities; Qualitative research; Reading literacy; Teacher experiences; Thematic analysis.*

Reading literacy is a foundational skill that supports academic achievement, lifelong learning, and meaningful participation in society. Despite its importance, low reading literacy remains a persistent global educational challenge. Nearly 70% of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and comprehend a simple text, a condition referred to as learning poverty (World Bank, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further widened existing learning gaps and disrupted literacy development. Similar concerns persist in developed countries, where a substantial proportion of Grade 4 learners continue to perform below basic

reading proficiency, particularly those from low-income and culturally diverse backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

In the Philippines, literacy challenges remain evident despite high rates of basic literacy. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2025), while 93.1% of Filipinos are basically literate, only 70.8% demonstrate functional literacy. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural and geographically isolated communities where poverty, limited access to instructional resources, and constrained educational opportunities hinder literacy development. Similar issues are observed in low-income school settings in the United States, where teachers contend with linguistic diversity, socio-emotional concerns, and unequal access to early literacy interventions.

Existing literature suggests that reading difficulties are closely linked to broader socioeconomic and contextual factors. Learners in marginalized communities often experience limited exposure to reading materials, language barriers, and insufficient instructional support, contributing to persistent literacy gaps (UNESCO, 2023; Mallillin & Caras, 2021). Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment further highlights the magnitude of the issue in the Philippines, where learners have demonstrated low reading performance relative to international standards (OECD, 2019). Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently enter school with limited vocabulary and literacy experiences, placing them at greater risk for long-term academic difficulties (Oracion, 2020).

Teachers play a critical role in addressing these challenges, yet they often work under demanding conditions. Studies have documented difficulties such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional materials, irregular attendance, and inadequate support for remedial instruction (Reyes & Dela Cruz, 2022). The pandemic intensified these concerns by exposing digital inequities and disrupting continuity in literacy instruction (Mabaquiao & Tolentino, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Despite these constraints, teachers continue to demonstrate resilience and adaptability through context-specific strategies such as peer-assisted learning, contextualized materials, and community-based support mechanisms (Bautista & Molina, 2020; Delos Santos, 2021). At the same time, research has shown that resilience alone cannot overcome persistent structural barriers, as teachers often experience emotional strain and professional burnout while sustaining literacy interventions under challenging conditions (Flores & Day, 2022; Mansfield et al., 2023). These contrasting perspectives suggest that literacy instruction in at-risk communities requires not only teacher commitment but also sustained institutional and community support.

Understanding teachers' experiences requires theoretical perspectives that account for the social, contextual, and structural dimensions of literacy development. Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory provide complementary lenses for examining how teachers address literacy challenges in diverse educational settings (Comber & Kamler, 2016; Gee, 2017; Penuel & Gallagher, 2017).

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits that literacy development occurs through social interaction and guided participation. Within this perspective, teachers serve as mediators who facilitate literacy learning through scaffolding, modeling, questioning, and collaborative dialogue. Literacy is therefore understood as a socially constructed process in which learners develop reading competence through meaningful interactions with teachers, peers, and their cultural environment. This perspective informed the study's examination of how teachers adapt instructional practices to support learners experiencing reading difficulties.

Complementing this perspective, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasizes that interconnected environmental systems shape literacy development. While teachers directly influence learning within the classroom, their efforts are also affected by family involvement, school policies, community resources, and broader educational and cultural contexts. This framework informed the study's examination of how multiple contextual influences shape teachers' experiences in promoting literacy across diverse educational settings.

Critical Literacy Theory (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010) further extends the discussion by examining how literacy can either reinforce or challenge social inequalities. The theory encourages learners to critically engage with texts, question inequities, and develop awareness of the social realities influencing their educational experiences. Within this perspective, teachers serve as facilitators who promote inclusive, equitable, and socially responsive literacy practices. The theory also informed the study's examination of how teachers support learners from marginalized communities by creating opportunities for meaningful participation and educational empowerment.

While each theory offers valuable insights, each also has limitations when applied independently. Sociocultural Theory may underemphasize broader structural influences beyond immediate social interactions, Ecological Systems Theory provides limited guidance for specific instructional practices, and Critical Literacy Theory may be difficult to implement consistently in contexts constrained by curricular demands and limited resources. Taken together, however, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding literacy development as a product of social interaction, contextual conditions, and educational inequities. Their integration offers a holistic lens for interpreting teachers' experiences, instructional responses, and the broader factors influencing literacy development in at-risk communities.

Recent qualitative studies have explored teachers' experiences in literacy instruction, identifying themes related to resource constraints, learner diversity, and instructional adaptation (Santos & Paderes, 2021; Lim & Rosales, 2022). However, much of the existing research focuses on urban settings or specific educational levels, with limited attention to teachers working in rural, marginalized, or post-pandemic contexts. Moreover, previous studies have often examined literacy challenges, instructional practices, or contextual influences separately, providing limited understanding of how these dimensions interact within teachers' experiences across diverse educational settings.

Guided by Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory, this study examined teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities. These complementary perspectives provided the framework for understanding teachers' instructional practices, the contextual influences shaping literacy development, and the inequities affecting learners' access to meaningful literacy opportunities. By adopting a qualitative research design using thematic analysis, the study sought to generate context-sensitive insights into the challenges teachers encountered, the strategies they employed, their perceptions of literacy work, and the ways their experiences varied across different social, cultural, and geographical settings.

Although literacy development is influenced by multiple learner, instructional, and contextual factors, this study did not seek to examine all dimensions of literacy or learner achievement. Instead, it focused specifically on teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities. The investigation was limited to four interconnected dimensions of teachers' experiences: (1) the challenges they encountered, (2) the strategies they employed in response, (3) their perceptions of literacy instruction, and (4) the influence of social, cultural, and geographical contexts on these experiences. This focused scope was intended to provide an in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of teachers' experiences while maintaining sufficient analytic depth.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges do teachers encounter in promoting reading literacy in at-risk communities?
2. How do teachers respond to or cope with these challenges in their literacy instruction?
3. What are teachers' perceptions of their experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities?
4. How do teachers' experiences vary across different social, cultural, and geographical settings?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis to explore teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena by exploring how individuals interpret, construct, and make meaning of their experiences within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach enabled an in-depth examination of teachers' perspectives, instructional practices, and contextual realities across diverse educational settings. The study was guided by Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory, which provided the theoretical framework for interpreting teachers' experiences and the multiple social, cultural, and structural influences shaping literacy development.

The study utilized thematic analysis following the framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke

(2006). Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and its capacity to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning across qualitative data. Rather than seeking the essence of individual experiences, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' accounts. This approach allowed the researcher to develop a structured yet context-sensitive understanding of how teachers navigate literacy challenges, implement instructional strategies, and interpret their professional roles within diverse educational contexts. A reflexive and interpretive stance was adopted throughout the analytic process to ensure that theme development remained grounded in participants' narratives while acknowledging the researcher's role in knowledge construction.

Research Environment

The study was conducted across selected educational contexts in the Philippines and the United States. In the Philippines, participants were drawn from public elementary and secondary schools located in the districts of Dalaguete II, Sibonga, and Santander in Cebu Province, as well as from an educational institution in Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental. These areas represent rural and semi-urban communities characterized by persistent literacy challenges associated with socioeconomic constraints, limited access to instructional resources, and post-pandemic learning disruptions.

To provide a comparative perspective, additional data were collected from Filipino teachers currently teaching in schools in South Dakota, United States. The inclusion of a specific state context addresses variations in educational resources, instructional support, and learning environments. A Filipino teacher based in South Dakota assisted in facilitating data collection among participants in this location. The selection of these sites was purposeful, as they represent diverse educational contexts where teachers encounter varying literacy-related challenges. Including both local and international teaching environments allowed the study to examine how similar professional backgrounds are shaped by different socio-cultural and institutional conditions in addressing reading literacy.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study involved twenty-eight (28) teacher-participants selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling. All participants were Filipino educators teaching learners with reading difficulties in diverse educational contexts in the Philippines and the United States.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) they were licensed teachers; (2) they had at least two years of teaching experience; and (3) they were currently teaching in communities characterized by limited educational resources or diverse literacy needs. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient experience and contextual exposure relevant to the study's focus on reading literacy challenges in at-risk settings. The distribution of participants across locations was as follows: five (5) teachers from Dalaguete II District, four (4) from Sibonga District, and five (5) from Santander District, all in Cebu Province; seven (7) teachers from Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental; and seven (7) Filipino teachers currently teaching in South Dakota, United States. This distribution allowed the study to capture perspectives from both rural and semi-urban Philippine contexts, as well as from an international setting with different levels of educational resources and institutional support.

The inclusion of Filipino teachers teaching in South Dakota provided a comparative dimension, enabling the study to examine how teachers with similar professional and cultural backgrounds navigate literacy challenges across differing educational systems. This cross-context sampling strengthened the analysis by highlighting both context-specific and shared patterns in teachers' experiences and instructional responses. The sample size of 28 participants is consistent with qualitative research employing thematic analysis, where the goal is to generate rich, meaningful patterns across participants' accounts rather than statistical generalization. The number of participants was deemed sufficient to capture variation in experiences while allowing for in-depth analysis of recurring themes.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research because they combine a predetermined set of open-ended questions with the flexibility to explore participants' responses in greater depth through follow-up questions and probing (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach was appropriate for the present study because it enabled participants to describe their

experiences, perceptions, and instructional practices while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues relevant to reading literacy in at-risk communities.

The interview guide was developed based on the research questions, the study's theoretical framework, and a review of related literature on reading literacy, teacher experiences, literacy instruction, and contextual influences on learning. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit teachers' experiences regarding (1) the challenges they encounter in promoting reading literacy, (2) the strategies they employ to address these challenges, (3) their perceptions of literacy instruction, and (4) the influence of social, cultural, and geographical contexts on their experiences. Probing questions were used, when necessary, to clarify participants' responses and obtain richer descriptions. Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent expert validation to establish its content relevance, clarity, and appropriateness. Minor revisions were incorporated based on the validators' recommendations. Interviews were conducted individually, with participants' permission, and were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data collected. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Prior to data gathering, permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant school authorities, and participants were invited to participate voluntarily. Each participant was provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time. Interviews were conducted either in person or through online communication platforms, depending on participants' location and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure accurate documentation of responses. Flexible scheduling and alternative communication methods were employed to accommodate participants and address potential logistical or connectivity constraints. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. To enhance credibility, participants were given the opportunity to review and verify their transcripts through member checking. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored and treated with strict confidentiality throughout the research process. These procedures ensured the ethical conduct of the study and strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, a flexible and widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. This approach was appropriate for the study because it enabled a systematic yet interpretive examination of teachers' experiences and perspectives across diverse educational contexts. Consistent with the study's qualitative orientation, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and shared meanings across participants' accounts rather than measuring the frequency of responses.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of data relevant to the research questions. Third, the codes were organized into potential themes representing recurring patterns across participants' accounts. Fourth, the themes were reviewed, refined, and compared against the dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, themes were defined and named to accurately capture their central meaning and relevance to the study objectives. Finally, the themes were synthesized into an analytic narrative supported by participant quotations and interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework and relevant literature.

The analysis was conducted manually to facilitate close and sustained engagement with the data. A reflexive approach was adopted throughout the analytic process, with the researcher maintaining reflective notes and a reflexive journal to document emerging insights, assumptions, and analytic decisions. Peer debriefing was conducted to enhance the credibility and consistency of theme development, while member checking was employed to verify the accuracy of participants' accounts and interpretations. Trustworthiness was further strengthened through systematic documentation of analytic procedures, thereby promoting transparency, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles to ensure the protection of participants' rights, dignity, privacy, and well-being throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the appropriate school administrators and relevant authorities. Participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, data collection procedures, and their rights as research participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of participants' names, and identifying information, including the names of schools and institutions, was excluded from transcripts and research reports. All interview recordings, transcripts, and related research materials were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Data will be retained and disposed of in accordance with accepted research and institutional guidelines.

Given that the study focused on teachers' professional experiences in addressing reading literacy challenges, the level of risk to participants was considered minimal. Nevertheless, participants were encouraged to share only information they were comfortable disclosing and were reminded of their right to discontinue participation at any time. Throughout the research process, the researcher adhered to principles of transparency, accuracy, integrity, and respect to ensure that participants' perspectives were represented faithfully and responsibly.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used only to support language refinement, grammar checking, and the improvement of academic writing during manuscript preparation. AI was not used to generate research data, conduct interviews, code qualitative data, develop themes, interpret findings, or formulate the study's conclusions. All aspects of the research process, including the study design, data collection, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and final decisions regarding the content of the manuscript, were carried out solely by the researcher. The researcher carefully reviewed, verified, and accepted full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

Results and Discussion

Challenges Teachers Encounter in Promoting Reading Literacy

Teachers across the participating educational contexts identified multiple interconnected challenges that hinder the development of reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities. The analysis revealed five major themes: (1) limited home literacy exposure in survival-oriented households, (2) competing digital distractions and declining reading engagement, (3) managing diverse reading levels in resource-constrained classrooms, (4) limited language exposure and weak foundational skills, and (5) systemic and resource-related constraints.

Theme 1: Limited Home Literacy Exposure in Survival-Oriented Households

These findings highlight how the home environment deeply influences early literacy development. Limited access to books and literacy practices reflects broader socioeconomic conditions that constrain children's opportunities for early reading engagement. Consistent with this, research shows that children from economically disadvantaged households often have reduced access to literacy materials and experiences, which negatively affects reading readiness and long-term academic outcomes (Neuman, Moland, & Celano, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Global reports further emphasize that disparities in home literacy environments contribute to persistent learning gaps among learners in marginalized communities (World Bank, 2022). Similarly, Oracion (2020) noted that children from low-income and geographically isolated communities frequently begin formal schooling with limited vocabulary and literacy experiences, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

One teacher's observation that *"some learners have never held a storybook because their parents are busy earning a living"* reflects how economic pressures can shape family priorities and restrict opportunities for literacy engagement. However, the relationship between poverty and literacy development is not always deterministic. While material deprivation often limits access to books and educational resources, studies suggest that supportive family interactions, oral storytelling practices, and parental encouragement can foster literacy development even in resource-constrained households (Neuman et al., 2021). This suggests that literacy development is influenced not only by the availability of reading materials but also by the quality of interactions that expose children to language and meaning-making experiences.

Moreover, research has shown that literacy interventions do not always yield positive outcomes solely through the provision of books or learning materials. In some contexts, interventions have achieved limited success when families lacked the time, confidence, or capacity to support literacy activities at home (UNESCO, 2023). Such findings indicate that improving literacy outcomes requires more than addressing resource shortages; it also requires strengthening family engagement and creating supportive literacy cultures within communities.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings demonstrate how factors within the family environment directly influence children's literacy development before they enter school. At the same time, Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) suggests that meaningful interactions with parents, caregivers, and other adults play a critical role in mediating literacy learning. Together, these perspectives indicate that early literacy challenges in at-risk communities are not solely instructional concerns but are rooted in broader household and community conditions that shape learners' access to meaningful literacy experiences.

Theme 2: Competing Digital Distractions and Declining Reading Engagement

These observations indicate that shifting media consumption patterns influence students' reading behaviors and engagement. The preference for fast-paced digital content may reduce opportunities for sustained reading practice, which is essential for developing comprehension skills. This aligns with research indicating that reading motivation plays a critical role in literacy development, with engaged readers demonstrating stronger comprehension and more consistent reading habits (Afflerbach, Cho, & Kim, 2021). Similarly, studies have shown that excessive engagement with entertainment-oriented digital media may contribute to shorter attention spans and reduced engagement with extended reading tasks, particularly among younger learners (UNESCO, 2023).

One participant's observation that *"they prefer phones and short videos over reading"* reflects a growing concern among educators regarding the influence of digital media on reading habits. However, the relationship between technology use and literacy development is more nuanced than a simple displacement of reading activities. While unregulated consumption of short-form digital content may reduce opportunities for sustained reading practice, research suggests that digital technologies can also enhance literacy when used intentionally for educational purposes. Access to e-books, interactive reading platforms, and digital storytelling applications has been shown to increase learner engagement and provide additional opportunities for literacy development (UNESCO, 2023).

Moreover, evidence suggests that low reading engagement cannot be attributed solely to technology use. Learners who lack positive reading experiences, access to appealing texts, or supportive literacy environments may be less inclined to engage in reading regardless of digital exposure (Afflerbach et al., 2021). This indicates that digital distractions may interact with broader motivational and contextual factors rather than operate as independent causes of low literacy engagement.

Viewed through a Sociocultural Theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), literacy engagement is shaped by learners' interactions with the tools, practices, and social environments that surround them. Digital technologies therefore represent both a challenge and an opportunity for literacy instruction. These findings suggest that literacy challenges are increasingly shaped by evolving digital engagement patterns, highlighting the need for instructional approaches that leverage technology as a tool for meaningful reading experiences rather than treating it solely as a source of distraction.

Theme 3: Managing Diverse Reading Levels in Resource-Constrained Classrooms

These findings underscore the complexity of literacy instruction in contexts where teachers must simultaneously address multiple levels of reading proficiency with limited time and resources. Such conditions make it difficult to implement differentiated instruction effectively. Similar challenges have been documented in disadvantaged educational settings, where overcrowded classrooms and insufficient instructional support hinder targeted literacy interventions (Bernardo, 2020).

One teacher's observation that *"the reading levels in one classroom vary too widely to address effectively"* reflects the practical difficulties of meeting diverse literacy needs within resource-constrained learning environments. However, learner diversity itself should not necessarily be viewed as a barrier to effective literacy instruction. Research suggests that differentiated instruction can improve literacy outcomes when teachers are provided with adequate training, instructional materials, and institutional support (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). This indicates

that challenges may arise not solely from differences in learners' reading abilities but from the structural conditions that limit teachers' capacity to respond effectively to those differences.

Moreover, while educational policies increasingly promote inclusive and differentiated instruction, teachers in under-resourced settings often encounter constraints that make such approaches difficult to implement consistently. The participant's statement that *"I want to help individually, but time is never enough"* highlights a persistent tension between pedagogical expectations and classroom realities. This suggests that successful literacy interventions require not only teacher expertise but also supportive conditions that enable teachers to provide targeted assistance to struggling readers.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings illustrate how broader institutional conditions, including class size, resource allocation, and instructional support systems, influence classroom-level challenges. Consequently, challenges in addressing diverse reading levels are not solely matters of instructional strategy but are shaped by structural classroom conditions. This underscores the need for systemic support, such as reduced class sizes, targeted intervention programs, and additional instructional resources, to enable teachers to implement differentiated literacy instruction more effectively.

Theme 4: Limited English Exposure and Vocabulary Constraints in Multilingual Contexts

These findings indicate that reading difficulties extend beyond decoding and are closely tied to learners' language proficiency and exposure. In multilingual contexts, limited use of the language of instruction outside the classroom restricts opportunities for vocabulary development and meaningful language engagement. This observation is supported by research emphasizing that vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency are critical for constructing meaning from text and for advancing comprehension skills (Kim, 2020). Without sufficient linguistic support, learners may struggle to move from basic decoding toward deeper levels of understanding.

The participant's observation that learners *"struggle with vocabulary and comprehension, especially in English"* reflects the challenges faced by students who have limited opportunities to use English beyond the classroom. However, multilingualism should not be viewed solely as a barrier to literacy development. Research suggests that learners' first languages can serve as important cognitive and linguistic resources that support literacy acquisition when appropriately integrated into instruction (Cummins, 2021). From this perspective, literacy difficulties may stem less from linguistic diversity itself and more from limited opportunities to connect learners' home languages with the language of instruction.

Moreover, studies have shown that vocabulary development is most effective when language learning is embedded within meaningful literacy experiences rather than taught in isolation (Kim, 2020). This suggests that strengthening literacy outcomes requires more than increasing exposure to English; it also requires creating opportunities for learners to engage with language in authentic, culturally relevant, and contextually meaningful ways. Consequently, instructional approaches that recognize and build upon learners' existing linguistic resources may be more effective than approaches that focus exclusively on language deficits.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), language serves as a primary tool for learning and meaning-making. Literacy development therefore occurs through social interaction and participation in language-rich environments. These findings suggest that literacy challenges in multilingual and resource-limited contexts are fundamentally language-mediated, highlighting the need for integrated language and literacy instruction that strengthens both vocabulary development and comprehension while valuing learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Theme 5: Systemic Resource Constraints and Disruptions to Literacy Continuity

These findings demonstrate how institutional and structural limitations constrain the effectiveness of literacy interventions in at-risk communities. Limited access to instructional materials reduces opportunities for consistent reading practice, while disruptions in attendance and schooling interrupt the continuity necessary for literacy development. Such conditions create cumulative learning gaps that are difficult to address within regular classroom instruction. This aligns with global evidence indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly widened existing learning gaps and disrupted literacy acquisition, particularly among disadvantaged learners (UNICEF, UNESCO, & World Bank, 2021).

The participant's observation that *"we don't have enough books or updated materials"* highlights the persistent resource shortages that characterize many educational settings serving vulnerable populations. While teachers often demonstrate creativity and commitment in adapting instruction under such conditions, research suggests that teacher effort alone cannot fully compensate for prolonged resource deprivation and systemic inequities (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, the observation that *"absences and interruptions make reading progress very slow"* underscores how disruptions to instructional continuity can undermine even well-designed literacy interventions.

At the same time, evidence from resource-constrained settings indicates that community partnerships, localized literacy initiatives, and teacher-led innovations can partially mitigate the effects of limited resources (Bautista & Molina, 2020; Delos Santos, 2021). However, these efforts are often difficult to sustain without institutional support and may not fully address the underlying causes of educational disadvantage. This tension suggests that while teacher resilience remains an important factor in promoting literacy development, meaningful and long-term improvements require broader systemic interventions that address resource inequities and learning disruptions.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings illustrate how literacy development is influenced not only by classroom interactions but also by institutional, community, and societal conditions. The findings therefore highlight that literacy challenges are not merely classroom-based concerns but are shaped by systemic factors that affect learners' access to meaningful literacy opportunities. Consequently, sustained institutional support, adequate resource provision, and continuity-focused interventions are essential to strengthening literacy development in at-risk communities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that literacy challenges in at-risk communities cannot be attributed to a single factor. Rather, they emerge from the interaction of home literacy conditions, learner motivation, language exposure, classroom realities, and broader systemic constraints. Viewed collectively, these interconnected influences reinforce the importance of understanding literacy development as a socially, linguistically, and structurally situated process. The findings further highlight that effective literacy interventions require not only instructional expertise but also supportive home environments, adequate educational resources, and sustained institutional commitment to addressing educational inequities.

Teachers' Coping Strategies in Addressing Reading Literacy Challenges

Teachers described a range of strategies used to address the challenges of low reading literacy among learners. These strategies span engaging instructional approaches, individualized support, structured literacy practices, collaboration with stakeholders, and personal resilience. Participants' responses reveal how teachers actively adapt their instructional practices to meet diverse learner needs despite resource limitations and contextual challenges.

Theme 1: Making Reading Meaningful Through Interactive and Contextualized Learning

These responses suggest that teachers recognize learner motivation as a critical factor in literacy development. Rather than viewing reading as a purely academic task, participants intentionally transformed literacy activities into meaningful learning experiences that promote engagement and participation. One teacher's statement, *"I try to make reading enjoyable through storytelling, songs, and games,"* reflects a deliberate effort to reduce learners' anxiety toward reading and foster positive attitudes toward literacy. Similarly, the observation that teachers respond *"with creativity, determination, and heart"* highlights the commitment of educators to sustaining learner engagement despite resource limitations and contextual challenges.

This finding aligns with the work of Duke, Ward, and Pearson (2021), who emphasized that interactive and student-centered literacy instruction enhances learner engagement and comprehension. Research likewise suggests that learners are more likely to develop positive reading habits when literacy activities are meaningful, relevant, and connected to their lived experiences (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2020). Such approaches are particularly important in at-risk communities, where learners may have limited exposure to positive literacy experiences outside the classroom.

However, while interactive and contextualized strategies can increase learner engagement, their effectiveness may be constrained by broader structural and contextual factors. Learners facing persistent socioeconomic challenges, limited home literacy support, or frequent disruptions in schooling may continue to struggle despite teachers' efforts to make reading enjoyable. This suggests that engaging instructional practices, while essential, may not be

sufficient on their own to address deeper literacy inequities. Consequently, literacy interventions must be supported by broader efforts that strengthen home, school, and community literacy environments.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), these findings illustrate how teachers act as mediators of learning by creating interactive and socially meaningful literacy experiences. Through storytelling, collaborative activities, and contextualized instruction, teachers scaffold learners' engagement with texts and support literacy development within culturally relevant contexts. The findings therefore suggest that effective literacy instruction in at-risk communities requires teachers to serve not only as instructors but also as facilitators of meaningful learning experiences that connect reading to learners' lives and realities.

Theme 2: Adapting Instruction to Diverse Reading Needs

These findings indicate that teachers view literacy instruction as a responsive and adaptive process rather than a standardized one. Participants continually modified content, pacing, and instructional support based on learners' individual needs. One participant's statement, *"I break reading materials into parts and guide the students step by step,"* reflects the use of scaffolding strategies that enable struggling readers to gradually build comprehension and confidence. Similarly, the use of small-group instruction and differentiated activities demonstrates teachers' efforts to create inclusive learning environments where learners receive support appropriate to their level of proficiency.

The findings support previous research showing that differentiated instruction improves learner comprehension, confidence, and participation by aligning instruction with learners' developmental levels (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Research further suggests that targeted instructional support is particularly beneficial for learners experiencing reading difficulties because it allows teachers to address specific literacy needs while promoting active engagement in learning (Tomlinson, 2021). Such approaches are especially important in at-risk communities where learners often enter the classroom with varying levels of literacy readiness and prior reading experiences.

However, while differentiated instruction is widely recognized as an effective literacy practice, its implementation can be challenging in resource-constrained educational settings. Teachers managing large classes, limited instructional time, and multiple reading levels may struggle to consistently provide individualized support to all learners. This suggests that the success of differentiated instruction depends not only on teacher expertise but also on the availability of institutional support, instructional resources, and manageable classroom conditions. Consequently, adaptive teaching practices may be constrained when systemic conditions do not adequately support instructional responsiveness.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), these findings illustrate how teachers facilitate learning by providing scaffolds that help learners progress from their current level of understanding toward higher levels of literacy competence. Through differentiated instruction, guided support, and collaborative learning opportunities, teachers mediate literacy development in ways that respond to learners' diverse needs and backgrounds. More importantly, the findings highlight teachers' professional agency in addressing educational inequities through adaptive and learner-centered instructional practices.

Theme 3: Building Literacy Foundations Through Structured Support

These responses demonstrate teachers' reliance on structured and explicit literacy instruction to address reading difficulties. Participants recognized that literacy development is a gradual process requiring consistent reinforcement and systematic support. One teacher's observation that *"guided reading and repeated practice have proven to be the most effective"* reflects the importance of providing learners with repeated opportunities to apply and strengthen emerging literacy skills. Similarly, the use of one-on-one reading, peer tutoring, and visual supports highlights teachers' efforts to scaffold learning and provide targeted assistance to struggling readers.

This finding is consistent with research indicating that explicit literacy instruction, including phonics, guided reading, and repeated practice, significantly improves decoding accuracy, reading fluency, and comprehension among struggling readers (Kim, 2020). Studies have likewise shown that systematic literacy instruction is particularly beneficial for learners who experience persistent reading difficulties because it provides structured opportunities to develop foundational reading competencies (Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021). Such approaches are especially valuable in at-risk communities where learners may enter school with limited literacy experiences and varying levels of preparedness.

However, while structured literacy instruction is widely recognized as an effective approach, some scholars caution that foundational skills instruction alone may not be sufficient to sustain long-term literacy development. Learners also require meaningful opportunities to apply reading skills in authentic contexts, engage with diverse texts, and develop motivation for reading. Consequently, effective literacy instruction requires a balance between explicit skill development and opportunities for meaningful literacy engagement. This suggests that foundational literacy skills serve as necessary, but not exclusive, components of successful reading development.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the use of guided reading, peer tutoring, and scaffolded instruction reflects the teacher's role in supporting learners as they progress toward greater literacy competence. Through structured support and collaborative learning experiences, teachers help learners move from assisted performance to more independent reading practices. The findings therefore suggest that teachers perceive foundational literacy skills as essential building blocks for broader academic success while recognizing the importance of sustained support throughout the literacy development process.

Theme 4: Extending Literacy Support Beyond the Classroom

These findings indicate that teachers do not perceive literacy development as the sole responsibility of schools. Instead, participants viewed literacy learning as a shared responsibility among educators, families, and communities. One participant's statement, *"I regularly communicate with parents to encourage constant supervision of their child's progress,"* reflects teachers' efforts to extend literacy support beyond classroom boundaries and strengthen home-school partnerships. Similarly, the provision of take-home activities demonstrates teachers' commitment to creating opportunities for literacy engagement within learners' home environments.

This finding supports UNESCO (2023), which emphasizes the importance of family engagement and collaborative school environments in strengthening literacy outcomes. Research has consistently shown that parental involvement, teacher collaboration, and community support contribute positively to learners' reading achievement, motivation, and overall academic success (Epstein, 2018). Professional collaboration among teachers likewise promotes the sharing of effective instructional practices and enhances the quality of literacy instruction through collective problem-solving and professional learning.

However, fostering meaningful collaboration can be challenging in communities facing socioeconomic hardship. Parents who work long hours or have limited literacy skills themselves may be unable to provide consistent support for reading activities at home. Consequently, while family involvement is widely recognized as a key factor in literacy development, opportunities for engagement may vary considerably across households and communities. This suggests that literacy initiatives should be designed in ways that accommodate the realities and capacities of families rather than assuming uniform levels of participation.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings illustrate how interactions across multiple environmental systems influence literacy development. The relationship between schools and families represents an important mesosystem that shapes learners' educational experiences, while community support structures further strengthen literacy opportunities beyond the classroom. The findings therefore reinforce the view that literacy development is a collaborative and socially situated process that requires coordinated support from schools, families, and communities to effectively address literacy challenges in at-risk settings.

Theme 5: Sustaining Literacy Work Through Resilience and Professional Commitment

These insights reveal that coping with literacy challenges involves not only instructional adaptation but also emotional resilience and professional commitment. Participants described resilience as an ongoing process of balancing learner needs, institutional demands, and personal well-being while continuing to provide quality instruction. One teacher's reflection that *"my mental health matters... however, I try my best to supply my students with the best learning materials possible"* illustrates the tension between professional dedication and personal well-being. Similarly, participants' persistence despite limited resources and challenging teaching conditions reflects a strong commitment to supporting learners' literacy development.

This finding aligns with studies indicating that teacher resilience is a critical factor in sustaining motivation, effectiveness, and professional commitment in resource-constrained educational settings (Flores & Day, 2022; Gu

& Day, 2021). Research suggests that resilient teachers are more likely to adapt to changing circumstances, maintain positive relationships with learners, and continue implementing effective instructional practices despite adversity. Such resilience is particularly important in at-risk communities where socioeconomic, linguistic, and institutional constraints often compound literacy challenges.

However, resilience should not be viewed as an unlimited resource. While teachers may demonstrate remarkable adaptability and commitment, prolonged exposure to heavy workloads, insufficient resources, and emotional demands can contribute to stress, fatigue, and professional burnout (Kim & Asbury, 2020). This suggests that teacher effectiveness depends not only on individual resilience but also on the availability of organizational, professional, and emotional support systems. Consequently, efforts to improve literacy outcomes should include measures that promote teacher well-being alongside learner-focused interventions.

Viewed through the lenses of Sociocultural Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, teachers function as mediators who support literacy development while simultaneously navigating the contextual conditions that shape educational practice. Their ability to sustain literacy instruction is influenced not only by personal commitment but also by the broader institutional and community environments in which they work. The findings therefore suggest that literacy instruction in at-risk communities is both a pedagogical and emotional endeavor requiring sustained professional dedication, supportive working conditions, and ongoing opportunities for professional growth.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teachers' responses to low reading literacy extend beyond the application of instructional techniques. Their strategies reflect a broader form of professional agency characterized by adaptation, creativity, collaboration, and resilience. Across the themes, teachers responded to literacy challenges by creating meaningful learning experiences, differentiating instruction, providing structured literacy support, engaging families and communities, and sustaining their commitment despite significant constraints. Viewed collectively, these strategies demonstrate how the interaction of instructional practices, social relationships, and contextual conditions shapes literacy development. Rather than functioning merely as implementers of literacy programs, teachers actively mediate the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage, resource limitations, and learner diversity within their classrooms. These findings highlight the critical role of teachers as adaptive change agents who continuously negotiate contextual constraints while creating meaningful opportunities for literacy development among at-risk learners.

Teachers' Perceptions of Their Experiences in Addressing Low Reading Literacy

Teachers described their experiences in addressing learners' low reading literacy as both rewarding and demanding. Participants expressed a range of emotions, including fulfillment, frustration, responsibility, and personal growth. These experiences shape how teachers understand their professional roles and reinforce their commitment to supporting learners who struggle with reading. The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that reflect how teachers make sense of their literacy work.

Theme 1: Finding Purpose in Learners' Reading Progress

These responses suggest that teachers derive meaning from the visible growth of their learners. Rather than measuring success solely through formal assessments, participants often viewed incremental improvements in confidence, participation, and reading ability as indicators of success. One participant's reflection that "*it is fulfilling when a child who used to avoid reading becomes confident*" illustrates how teachers attach personal and professional significance to learners' progress. Similarly, the belief that literacy development helps prepare learners for "a better future" highlights the broader purpose teachers associate with their work beyond the acquisition of reading skills.

This finding aligns with recent research indicating that teachers' professional satisfaction is closely linked to their perceptions of student growth, engagement, and achievement (Flores & Day, 2022; OECD, 2023). Studies suggest that witnessing learners overcome challenges and achieve meaningful progress reinforces teachers' sense of efficacy, motivation, and commitment to their profession. In literacy instruction, where development often occurs gradually, even small gains in reading confidence and competence may serve as important indicators of success and sources of professional fulfillment.

However, the findings also point to a potential tension within literacy instruction. While learner progress provides teachers with a sense of accomplishment, literacy development is often a slow and uneven process, particularly among learners facing socioeconomic, linguistic, or educational disadvantages. As a result, teachers may experience periods of frustration when progress is not immediately visible despite sustained instructional effort. This suggests that professional fulfillment in literacy instruction is not solely derived from measurable outcomes but also from teachers' ability to recognize and value incremental growth and long-term developmental gains.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), learner progress reflects the outcomes of sustained social interaction, guidance, and scaffolding provided by teachers and other members of the learning community. The findings therefore suggest that learner progress functions not only as an educational outcome but also as an important source of teacher fulfillment, professional meaning, and continued commitment to supporting literacy development among struggling readers.

Theme 2: Carrying the Emotional Weight of Literacy Work

These responses reveal that literacy instruction involves significant emotional labor. Teachers often invest substantial time, energy, and personal commitment in supporting struggling readers, yet progress is not always immediate or visible. One participant's observation that *"it's discouraging when students don't take reading seriously"* reflects the emotional challenges associated with sustaining learner engagement in literacy activities. Similarly, the perception that instructional effort is not always reflected in learners' progress highlights the frustrations teachers may experience when working with struggling readers in challenging educational contexts.

This finding is consistent with recent studies suggesting that educators working in demanding environments frequently experience emotional strain while balancing instructional responsibilities, learner needs, and institutional expectations (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Flores & Day, 2022). Research further indicates that literacy instruction can be particularly demanding because reading development often occurs gradually, making progress difficult to observe within short periods of time (Mansfield et al., 2023). Consequently, teachers may experience feelings of disappointment, self-doubt, or emotional exhaustion when sustained effort does not immediately translate into visible learner improvement.

However, the findings also suggest that emotional challenges and professional commitment often coexist. While participants described feelings of frustration and discouragement, they simultaneously demonstrated persistence in continuing their literacy efforts despite setbacks. This reflects a tension identified in the literature between teacher resilience and teacher burnout. Although resilience enables teachers to cope with adversity and remain committed to their work, prolonged exposure to emotional demands, limited resources, and slow learner progress may place teachers at risk of stress and professional fatigue (Mansfield et al., 2023). This suggests that resilience should not be viewed solely as an individual responsibility but as a capacity that requires ongoing institutional and professional support.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), teachers' emotional experiences are influenced not only by classroom interactions but also by broader organizational and contextual conditions that shape their work. The findings therefore suggest that literacy instruction is not merely a technical or pedagogical task but also an emotionally demanding endeavor requiring sustained patience, empathy, and perseverance. Such realities highlight the importance of institutional support systems, professional development opportunities, and teacher well-being initiatives that promote both educator resilience and learner achievement.

Theme 3: Viewing Literacy Instruction as a Moral Responsibility

These responses suggest that teachers perceive literacy instruction as work that extends beyond academic achievement. Participants frequently framed their efforts in terms of equity, opportunity, and social responsibility, particularly when working with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. One participant's statement that *"education is their only opportunity"* reflects a belief that literacy can serve as a pathway toward improved life chances and broader social participation. Similarly, the view that every improvement in reading ability represents a meaningful achievement highlights teachers' commitment to supporting learners' long-term educational and personal development.

This finding is consistent with recent educational perspectives that position teachers as advocates for equity, inclusion, and learner empowerment (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Research suggests that educators working in

underserved communities often perceive their roles as extending beyond academic instruction to include supporting learners' aspirations, confidence, and future opportunities. In this sense, literacy instruction is viewed not only as the development of reading skills but also as a means of expanding learners' access to knowledge, participation, and social mobility.

However, the findings also point to an important tension. While teachers strongly believe that literacy can improve learners' life chances, literacy alone may not be sufficient to overcome the broader socioeconomic inequalities that many learners face. Factors such as poverty, limited educational resources, and unequal access to opportunities continue to influence educational outcomes even when literacy skills improve. This suggests that teachers' moral commitment is grounded not only in the belief that literacy changes lives but also in the recognition that literacy development must be supported by broader efforts to address educational inequities.

Viewed through the lens of Critical Literacy Theory (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010), literacy can be understood as a tool for empowerment that enables learners to participate more fully in society and critically engage with their social realities. Teachers therefore function not only as literacy instructors but also as advocates who seek to expand learners' opportunities through education. The findings further suggest that teachers' persistence in addressing literacy challenges is strengthened by a deeply held belief that literacy can contribute to greater educational equity and social inclusion. This moral commitment appears to serve as an important source of resilience, professional motivation, and sustained engagement in literacy work.

Theme 4: Growing Through the Challenges of Literacy Instruction

These responses indicate that literacy challenges function not only as obstacles but also as opportunities for professional learning. Participants described becoming more aware of learners' diverse needs and developing greater adaptability in response to classroom realities. One teacher's reflection that literacy experiences had shaped them into a "*more patient, creative, and adaptive teacher*" illustrates how engagement with struggling readers can influence both instructional practice and professional identity. Similarly, the recognition that teachers must continually adjust their approaches highlights the reflective nature of literacy instruction in complex educational settings.

This finding supports research suggesting that professional growth frequently emerges through engagement with complex teaching situations and challenging learning environments (Flores & Day, 2022; OECD, 2023). Recent studies indicate that teachers often develop adaptive expertise when they are required to respond to diverse learner needs, navigate uncertainty, and refine instructional strategies through experience (Mansfield et al., 2023). Such experiences encourage ongoing reflection and contribute to the development of professional confidence, instructional flexibility, and problem-solving skills.

However, professional growth should not be viewed as an automatic outcome of challenging experiences. While many teachers develop resilience and adaptive expertise through adversity, growth is often facilitated by access to professional support, collaboration, and opportunities for reflective practice. Without such supports, persistent challenges may contribute to frustration or professional fatigue rather than development. This suggests that teacher learning is influenced not only by the challenges encountered but also by the conditions that enable educators to reflect on and learn from those experiences.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), professional learning occurs through interaction, reflection, and participation within professional communities. Teachers' growth therefore emerges not only from individual effort but also from engagement with colleagues, learners, and the broader educational environment. The findings further suggest that literacy instruction serves as a context in which teachers continuously refine their professional identities, strengthen their instructional capabilities, and develop the adaptive expertise needed to respond effectively to diverse learner needs.

Contextual Variations in Teachers' Experiences Across Social, Cultural, and Geographical Settings

Teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy varied across different social, cultural, and geographical contexts. Participants explained that learners' exposure to reading materials, language practices at home, parental involvement, community support, and access to educational resources influenced both the literacy challenges they encountered and the strategies they adopted. Although the contexts differed across Guihulngan City, Cebu

Province, and South Dakota, United States, common patterns emerged that demonstrated how teachers continuously adapted to the realities of their respective teaching environments.

Theme 1: Unequal Literacy Opportunities Across Geographic and Socioeconomic Contexts

These findings suggest that early literacy exposure is unevenly distributed across geographical and socioeconomic contexts, directly influencing learners' reading development. This supports research indicating that children from disadvantaged and resource-limited environments often experience reduced access to books, literacy interactions, and educational opportunities, which negatively affect vocabulary growth and comprehension skills (Neuman, Moland, & Celano, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Consequently, teachers in these contexts frequently assume compensatory roles by providing additional scaffolding and remedial support to address literacy gaps that originate outside the school environment.

The participant's observation that *"students coming from urban barangays in Guihulngan usually read better than those coming from mountain areas"* reflects disparities in access to literacy-supportive environments across communities. Similarly, the reported difficulties in vocabulary and comprehension among learners from geographically isolated areas highlight how broader social and economic conditions often shape language exposure and educational opportunities. These findings are consistent with studies showing that geographic isolation frequently intersects with poverty, limited educational resources, and reduced access to literacy materials, creating cumulative disadvantages for learners (UNESCO, 2023).

However, geographical location alone does not necessarily determine literacy outcomes. Research suggests that some learners from disadvantaged communities demonstrate strong literacy development when supported by engaged families, effective teachers, and community-based literacy initiatives (Neuman et al., 2021). This indicates that literacy disparities may be better understood as products of unequal opportunities rather than inherent characteristics of particular communities. Consequently, educational interventions should focus not only on addressing geographic disparities but also on strengthening the literacy resources and support systems available within underserved communities.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings demonstrate how literacy development is shaped by interactions among family, school, community, and broader societal conditions. The findings therefore suggest that literacy challenges cannot be fully understood through classroom factors alone. Rather, they are closely connected to broader social and economic inequalities that shape learners' opportunities to engage with literacy before entering formal schooling.

Theme 2: Navigating Resource Abundance and Resource Scarcity

These reflections indicate that resource availability plays a critical role in shaping instructional opportunities and literacy support practices. This finding aligns with global education reports highlighting how disparities in educational resources contribute to unequal learning opportunities across countries and regions (UNESCO, 2023; UNICEF, UNESCO, & World Bank, 2021). Teachers working in resource-constrained settings therefore face additional challenges that require continuous adaptation and innovation.

The participant's observation that *"USA has the resources while in the Philippines it is very limited"* highlights the significant differences in educational infrastructure, instructional materials, and literacy support systems across contexts. Similarly, the comparison between learners' access to reading materials and technology underscores how resource availability can influence the range of instructional strategies available to teachers. Consistent with previous research, access to high-quality learning materials, digital technologies, and targeted literacy interventions has been associated with improved opportunities for literacy development and academic achievement (UNESCO, 2023).

However, the findings also suggest that resource availability alone does not guarantee successful literacy outcomes. Despite greater access to instructional materials and support systems, learners may continue to experience reading difficulties when motivation, engagement, or instructional responsiveness are lacking. Conversely, teachers in resource-constrained settings frequently described adapting materials, improvising instructional resources, and implementing creative strategies to support literacy development. This indicates that literacy outcomes are shaped not only by material resources but also by how those resources are utilized to support meaningful learning experiences.

From a Critical Literacy perspective (Freire, 1970; Janks, 2010), disparities in resource availability may be viewed as manifestations of broader educational inequities that influence learners' access to literacy opportunities. At the same time, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) highlights how institutional and community contexts shape the conditions under which literacy instruction occurs. Together, these perspectives suggest that while resource inequalities create significant challenges, teacher agency remains a critical factor in mediating their effects. The findings therefore reveal that effective literacy instruction depends not only on resource availability but also on the capacity of teachers to adapt, innovate, and respond to learners' needs within diverse educational contexts.

Theme 3: Literacy as a Reflection of Cultural and Community Contexts

These findings suggest that literacy development is influenced not only by material resources but also by cultural and social dynamics that shape learners' educational experiences. The participant's observation that *"kids in the Philippines are more responsible for their learning even if resources are limited"* illustrates how cultural values and expectations may influence learners' attitudes toward education and academic responsibility. Similarly, differences in parental involvement and societal attitudes toward literacy highlight the role of families and communities in shaping learners' opportunities to engage with reading both inside and outside school.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that literacy practices are socially situated and influenced by the cultural contexts in which learners live and interact (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Learners develop attitudes toward reading not only through formal instruction but also through participation in family routines, community practices, and culturally valued forms of communication. Consequently, literacy engagement is often shaped by the extent to which reading is supported, modeled, and reinforced within learners' immediate social environments.

However, cultural and community influences do not operate independently of socioeconomic conditions. While strong family expectations, community support, and positive educational values can encourage literacy engagement, economic pressures, parental work demands, and competing household responsibilities may limit opportunities for sustained literacy practice. This suggests that cultural influences can both facilitate and constrain literacy development, depending on the broader conditions in which families and communities function. As a result, literacy interventions that focus solely on instructional strategies without considering cultural and contextual realities may have limited effectiveness.

Viewed through the lens of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), literacy learning occurs through meaningful interactions within social and cultural environments. Teachers therefore play a critical role in bridging school-based literacy practices with learners' lived experiences, community values, and cultural backgrounds. The findings further indicate that effective literacy interventions cannot be separated from the communities in which learners live. Rather, meaningful and sustained literacy development requires instructional approaches that recognize and build upon the cultural assets, social relationships, and community resources available to learners.

Theme 4: Shared Commitment Beyond Contextual Differences

These narratives highlight the central role of teacher agency in addressing literacy challenges across diverse educational contexts. Regardless of differences in geography, culture, or resource availability, participants consistently demonstrated a commitment to adapting their instructional practices to meet learners' needs. One teacher's reflection that *"the challenges may look different – but the heart behind the work is the same"* illustrates a shared professional identity grounded in the belief that every learner deserves meaningful opportunities to develop literacy skills. Similarly, teachers' emphasis on flexibility and localized pedagogy reflects their willingness to modify instruction in response to contextual realities rather than relying on standardized approaches.

These findings are consistent with recent studies indicating that teacher commitment, professional agency, and adaptive expertise are critical for sustaining effective literacy instruction in diverse educational settings (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Research suggests that teachers who actively adapt instruction to learners' cultural, linguistic, and contextual needs are better positioned to promote learner engagement and equitable educational opportunities. At the same time, studies emphasize that teacher agency is strengthened when educators are supported through collaborative professional learning, institutional leadership, and access to instructional resources rather than relying solely on individual effort.

However, the findings also suggest that a shared commitment to literacy instruction does not eliminate the contextual inequalities teachers encounter. Although participants expressed similar professional values, the resources, institutional support, and opportunities available to them varied considerably across educational settings. This indicates that teacher commitment alone cannot fully compensate for structural disadvantages. Instead, meaningful improvements in literacy outcomes require both dedicated teachers and educational systems that provide equitable access to learning resources, professional support, and community partnerships.

Viewed through the lens of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these findings demonstrate that teacher commitment operates within interconnected educational environments shaped by families, schools, communities, and broader policy contexts. Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) further suggests that teachers act as mediators who facilitate literacy learning through purposeful social interaction and responsive instructional support. Collectively, these perspectives reinforce the finding that while contextual conditions influence literacy instruction, teachers remain key agents in creating meaningful learning opportunities and promoting educational equity across diverse settings.

Synthesis

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the interaction of geographic location, socioeconomic conditions, resource availability, and cultural influences shapes teachers' experiences with low reading literacy. Literacy challenges emerge differently across contexts because learners' opportunities for literacy exposure, educational support, and access to resources vary considerably. At the same time, a common pattern emerged across all settings: teachers consistently adapted their instructional practices to respond to contextual realities and learner needs.

Viewed through Sociocultural Theory, literacy development is shaped by learners' interactions with teachers, families, and communities that influence reading engagement and learning opportunities. Ecological Systems Theory further highlights how literacy outcomes are affected by interconnected environmental factors, including family circumstances, school resources, community conditions, and broader societal influences. From a Critical Literacy perspective, disparities in literacy opportunities reflect broader social and educational inequities that shape learners' access to meaningful literacy experiences.

More importantly, the findings suggest that literacy instruction is both context-dependent and teacher-mediated. While structural inequalities create significant challenges, teachers exercise considerable agency in navigating these conditions through adaptation, creativity, collaboration, and persistence. This study therefore contributes to a deeper understanding of how teachers negotiate diverse contextual realities while maintaining a shared commitment to promoting literacy development among learners. The findings underscore the importance of localized, culturally responsive, and resource-sensitive literacy interventions that recognize both the influence of contextual factors and the critical role of teacher expertise in supporting reading achievement.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of twenty-eight (28) teachers drawn from selected educational contexts in Cebu Province, Guihulngan City, and South Dakota, United States. Although the participants provided rich and diverse insights into literacy instruction in at-risk communities, the findings represent context-specific experiences and may not fully reflect the realities of teachers working in other educational settings or regions. As with most qualitative inquiries, the goal of the study was to generate in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalization; therefore, the findings should be viewed in terms of transferability to similar contexts.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported interview data. Participants' accounts were shaped by their personal experiences, interpretations, and reflections, which may have been influenced by memory, perception, or social desirability. While member checking and other trustworthiness procedures were employed to enhance credibility, the findings remain dependent on how participants interpreted and communicated their experiences.

Third, the study focused exclusively on teachers' perspectives. The absence of classroom observations, learner perspectives, parental viewpoints, school administrator insights, and objective measures of reading achievement limits the extent to which the findings capture the full complexity of literacy development in at-risk communities.

Future studies employing multiple data sources may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how literacy challenges are experienced and addressed across educational stakeholders.

Fourth, the contextual variations identified across social, cultural, and geographical settings were derived from participants' perceptions and descriptions rather than from standardized measures of literacy performance, socioeconomic status, school resources, or community characteristics. Consequently, the comparisons presented in this study should be interpreted as teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of contextual differences rather than objective evaluations of the educational settings examined.

Fifth, while the study was informed by Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory, the interpretation of findings was necessarily shaped by these theoretical perspectives. Alternative theoretical lenses may have emphasized different aspects of teachers' experiences and generated additional interpretations of the data. Future research may benefit from employing complementary theoretical frameworks to further explore literacy instruction in diverse educational contexts.

Finally, the study captures teachers' experiences at a particular point in time. Literacy challenges, instructional responses, educational policies, and resource conditions are dynamic and may change over time. Longitudinal research could provide deeper insights into how teachers' experiences, coping strategies, and perceptions of literacy instruction evolve in response to changing educational and social conditions.

Conclusions

This study explored teachers' experiences in addressing low reading literacy among learners in at-risk communities across diverse social, cultural, and geographical contexts. The findings reveal that literacy challenges are multifaceted and shaped by the interaction of socioeconomic disadvantage, limited home literacy exposure, language-related barriers, learner engagement issues, and resource constraints. These challenges extend beyond classroom instruction and reflect broader contextual conditions that influence learners' opportunities to develop meaningful literacy skills.

Despite these challenges, teachers demonstrated remarkable adaptability, resilience, and professional commitment in supporting struggling readers. Through differentiated instruction, structured literacy support, contextualized learning activities, collaboration with families and communities, and continuous instructional adaptation, teachers actively responded to learners' diverse needs. Their experiences highlight the critical role of teacher agency in mediating the effects of educational disadvantage and creating meaningful opportunities for literacy development.

The findings further demonstrate that teachers' experiences vary according to the social, cultural, and geographical contexts in which they work. Differences in literacy exposure, resource availability, community support, and educational opportunities shaped both the challenges encountered and the strategies employed by teachers. Nevertheless, a shared commitment to improving learners' literacy outcomes emerged across all settings, suggesting that professional dedication remains a common thread despite contextual differences.

Viewed through the lenses of Sociocultural Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Critical Literacy Theory, the findings suggest that literacy development is not solely an individual or instructional concern but a socially, culturally, and structurally situated process. Teachers function as important mediators who support literacy learning within complex environments shaped by family circumstances, community conditions, institutional resources, and broader social inequalities. At the same time, the findings illustrate how literacy instruction can serve as a means of promoting educational opportunity and addressing inequities that affect learners in marginalized communities.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its illumination of the lived experiences of teachers who work at the forefront of literacy development in at-risk communities. By highlighting the challenges they encounter, the strategies they employ, the meanings they attach to their work, and the contextual realities that shape their experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the human, contextual, and relational dimensions of literacy instruction.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening literacy support systems through equitable

resource provision, sustained professional development, meaningful family and community engagement, and context-responsive educational policies. Efforts to improve reading literacy should recognize not only the importance of instructional practices but also the broader social and structural conditions that influence literacy development. Supporting teachers as key agents of literacy development remains essential to promoting educational equity and improving reading outcomes among learners in at-risk communities.

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