

BEYOND A-BA-KA-DA

by:

DIANA C. MORES

Teacher II, Lucanin Integrated School

Reading has long been one of the most important strands in Philippine Education at the basic education level. However, many Filipino students still struggle with reading comprehension, a problem that has a significant impact on their learning process and long-term success, even after years of literacy programs and committed teaching efforts.

Only over 70.8% of Filipinos aged 10 to 64 are regarded as functionally literate, even though over 90% of them have basic literacy abilities. This indicates that even while many learners can read sentences out loud and recognize letters, they still struggle to comprehend what they are reading. This turn becomes a daily task for elementary school teachers, one that involves more than just decoding syllables, it involves creating meaning. This difficulty is not a reflection of the learners' lack of intelligence or effort, but rather of the systems inability to foster and maintain a reading culture that transcends from home to school, and back.

This need has long been acknowledged by the Department of Education, which launched the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP) in 2001 as a response. The goal of this initiative was to guarantee that every Filipino child will be able to read independently by the end of Grade 3. The Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy (ELLN) curriculum, which focuses on the development of fundamental skills in Kindergarten through Grade 3, eventually supplemented it.

Mass promotion, in which pupils are promoted to the next grade level regardless of whether they have fulfilled the minimal standards in reading or other critical competences, is one of the more contentious of these. Mass promotion has unintentionally allowed many children to fall farther behind, unable to keep up with lessons that presuppose reading proficiency they do not yet possess, despite its stated goal of lowering dropout rates and keeping students in school. This has an impact not only on classroom performance but also on national reading examinations, where many fourth graders perform far below grade-level expectations.

These difficulties stem from the larger reality that many learners must deal with. Students frequently arrive at school exhausted, hungry, or preoccupied with the needs of survival in areas where poverty is prevalent. Reading becomes a luxury in these situations, something to be done after one's essential requirements have been satisfied. Lack of access to age-appropriate reading materials and libraries impedes progress even in urban regions.

According to a 2023 assessment, just 3% of the legally required public libraries are open, and even fewer have enough resources or are manned by librarians with the necessary training. Children are increasingly using devices, which frequently provide amusement rather than instructional value, in families where books are rare. Textbooks and storybooks are now in competition with digital diversions for a child's attention.

Additionally, parents have a significant impact on whether reading habits are strengthened or weakened. Adults low reading levels frequently act as a hindrance to their ability to support their kids at home. Nevertheless, there are positive indications. More parents are reading to their kids thanks to community-based initiatives and national campaigns that remind them that all it takes to cultivate a love of reading is time, patience, and presence.

There is hope for the future. To keep kids interested, educators nationwide are incorporating guided reading, storytelling, and even local literature into their lessons. While DepEd continues to monitor and enhance the implementation of ECARP and ELLN, schools are gradually bolstering their library corners and reading programs. It is now necessary to make reading a shared value that is embraced by families, communities, and schools, rather than only a policy objective.

Reading is more than just a skill that can be taught, it is a habit that can be fostered, a joy that can be shared, and the secret to releasing each Filipino child's full potential. It's time we moved beyond "A-Ba-Ka-Da," and toward a future where children not only learn to read, but read to learn, imagine, and thrive.

References:

Philippine Statistics Authority. (2024). Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS).

Department of Education. (2017). DO 18, s. 2017 – Guidelines on the Utilization of the 2017 Every Child a Reader Program Funds.

Philippine News Agency. (2020). Parents urged to help DepEd make every child a reader.