

"READING BETWEEN THE LINES: THE CRISIS OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AMONG FILIPINO STUDENTS"

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In recent years, functional literacy has become a growing concern in the Philippine education system. Although many students can read aloud or recognize words, a deeper issue exists: the challenge of understanding, interpreting, and applying what they read in real-life situations. This issue goes beyond simply teaching students how to read—it points to a wider problem in how literacy is being developed and assessed in classrooms today.

According to the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Filipino students ranked the lowest in reading comprehension among 79 countries, with more than 80% of 15-year-olds unable to grasp the main idea in a passage or make basic inferences (OECD, 2019). This alarming result highlights the difference between basic literacy—being able to read words—and functional literacy, which involves understanding and using information effectively. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2020), the country's functional literacy rate for individuals aged 10 to 64 was at 91.6%, but this number does not always reflect the reality observed in classrooms, especially in public schools where resources are often stretched thin.

Several factors contribute to this literacy crisis. With the implementation of the K to 12 curriculums, the Department of Education adopted a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) approach in the early years of schooling. While this policy aims to build foundational skills in the learner's first language, its uneven implementation across regions has led to confusion and inconsistency in both teaching and learning (Ball & McCormick, 2018). Many students later transition into learning in

English or Filipino without fully mastering comprehension skills in their mother tongue, creating a shaky foundation for later academic tasks.

Another issue is the lack of engaging, contextually relevant reading materials. A study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS, 2021) revealed that most public schools rely on outdated books lacking in critical thinking and comprehension materials and worksheets. When students are not given the chance to connect what they read to real-life situations, their motivation to read – and understand – naturally declines. Teachers, too, face challenges. Many have not received enough training in teaching reading comprehension, especially in multi-lingual and mixed-ability classrooms. Large class sizes limited instructional time, and pressure to cover the curriculum often mean that in-depth reading instruction is neglected. Without consistent support, teachers struggle to guide students beyond word recognition and into deeper understanding.

The consequences of low functional literacy extend far beyond the classroom. Students who cannot process and analyze information effectively are at a disadvantage in all subjects, not just reading. In the long term, limited literacy can affect employment opportunities, civic participation, and overall quality of life. In this highly competitive world, functional literacy will be the key that not only opens doors of opportunities but also elevates the Filipino youth. As UNESCO (2022) emphasizes, literacy is not only a fundamental human right – it is also a key driver of sustainable development.

Addressing this crisis will require a multi-layered approach. First, there must be renewed investment in teacher training focused on reading comprehension strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy. Schools must also be equipped with a wider range of texts – ones that reflect Filipino realities and encourage students to think critically. Schools should not only measure how well students can read aloud or answer multiple-choice questions. They must also evaluate deeper skills like reasoning, interpretation, and real-world application. This way, we can truly understand the needs of learners and respond accordingly.

Reading empowers. However, to fully prepare the next generation of Filipino youth, workers, and leaders, we must equip them with the ability to truly understand, comprehend, and go beyond. Improving the country's literacy problem is not a matter of teaching harder or longer, but of teaching smarter, with efficiency, relevance, and clear purpose.

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