

CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES IN READING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of Grade Three pupils with reading, employing a qualitative, phenomenological approach to gain insights into their perceptions within the context of the MTB-MLE reading curriculum at Saint Anthony Elementary School, Cainta Rizal. Data were collected through observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions with ten participants. The findings reveal three primary themes: Reading as a Disengaged Process, Playing the Reading Game, and Untapped Knowledge. These themes highlight a spectrum of experiences, from perceived reading as a mandatory task to superficial engagement and varied individual preferences. The study suggests that to enhance reading experiences, educational systems should align reading materials with students' interests, promote authentic engagement through interactive and choice-based activities, adapt teaching approaches to diverse learning styles, and create supportive reading environments. Recommendations include curating diverse reading materials, developing interactive reading activities, employing differentiated instruction, fostering a positive reading culture, and integrating feedback mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

For almost a decade, reading has been a significant topic in research, with numerous innovations and interventions for literacy becoming widely accessible. Government support for these initiatives is evident, as seen in the enactment of RA 7743, which aims to enhance the moral and intellectual well-being of Filipinos by increasing literacy rates and emphasizing the critical role of education. Similarly, RA 10533 promotes the Education for All (EFA) initiative, which expects pupils to achieve literacy. Despite these efforts, recent literature indicates that children's voices remain largely unheard in literacy development. According to Cole (2019), while there is substantial research on children's reading problems, the lack of children's perspectives in literacy development remains a significant oversight, with children rarely having the opportunity to provide input on their reading experiences.

Research conducted annually explores solutions to children's reading difficulties, often showing optimistic results. However, despite the positive findings regarding the MTB-MLE curriculum's benefits, the persistent number of struggling readers raises questions about text comprehension. The National Achievement Test (NAT) results from 2012, as reported by the NSO Census of Population and Housing, revealed that Grade 3 students had a Mean Percentage Score of 54.42% in English reading comprehension and 58.61% in Filipino. These scores suggest that third-grade Filipino children are performing at an average level and face challenges in understanding texts in both languages. This issue is highlighted by recent studies, such as those by Ramirez and Castro (2018), who argue that despite numerous interventions, systemic issues remain unresolved.

Recent Phil-IRI pre-test results at SAES also showed a concerning number of struggling readers in grades three to six. At the Grade 3 level, where students are expected to have developed their reading skills fully, these results are particularly troubling. Grade 3 is considered a preparatory stage for more challenging intermediate phases of elementary education, during which reading difficulties are expected to become more pronounced (Nguyen & Thomas, 2019). This ongoing issue has drawn attention from educators, politicians, researchers, and both private and public enterprises. The collective outcry from various societal sectors underscores the need for more effective solutions and deeper consideration of children's perspectives in literacy development (Harris & Wilson, 2019; Patel & Lee, 2018).

As researchers delve into literacy studies, a noticeable trend has emerged: there is a significant gap in incorporating children's perspectives into research about their reading experiences. Instead, scholars often focus on devising solutions without fully understanding the viewpoints of 21st-century learners. Cole (2019) emphasizes that while discussions and debates about children and reading have predominantly centered on adult perspectives, children's voices and their insights into their own reading experiences have been consistently overlooked. This observation is further supported by Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2018), who highlight the persistent exclusion of children from decision-making processes related to literacy. They argue that policy and pedagogical practices must be developed with children's views in mind, suggesting a need for more inclusive approaches that consider their input.

This literature review prompted a significant shift in approach, leading to a direct examination of children's reading experiences. An informal conversation with a Grade 3 student revealed striking insights. The child's comments—"I always bring my book, Diary of

a Wimpy Kid, but my teacher says it's only for recess. I don't like what we read in school,"— underscored a disconnect between the child's reading preferences and the school curriculum. These statements highlighted the importance of listening to children's perspectives. This conversation served as a catalyst, reinforcing the belief that children's insights are crucial and that they desire to be heard, much like adults do.

The challenge of integrating children's perspectives into literacy research is substantial but essential. With nearly three years of experience within the education system, it has become clear that much of the current research fails to capture the full spectrum of children's experiences. The motivation to hear directly from children about their lived reading experiences has become a driving force in this research endeavor. It is a crucial time to address this gap and ensure that children's voices are not only heard but also valued in the development of effective literacy practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter foregrounds aspects of the research literature that have addressed the areas of children's perceptions, theoretical conceptions of reading, and reading engagement.

Recent studies from 2018 to 2019 have further illuminated the persistent challenges and evolving perspectives in literacy development, particularly in relation to children's reading experiences. While literacy initiatives have proliferated, research indicates that many issues remain unresolved, especially in terms of addressing the unique needs of struggling readers and incorporating children's perspectives into educational practices.

Ramirez and Castro (2018) examined the systemic issues in literacy programs, arguing that despite the implementation of various interventions, reading difficulties continue to plague a significant number of students. Their study highlighted the limitations of existing literacy programs, suggesting that these interventions often fail to address the root causes of reading difficulties, such as socio-economic factors, language barriers, and insufficient teacher training. Similarly, Harris and Wilson (2019) found that while interventions often yield short-term improvements, they do not always lead to long-term success. This suggests that the underlying issues, such as inconsistent pedagogical approaches and the lack of personalized learning strategies, remain inadequately addressed.

The importance of early literacy development is underscored by several studies. Nguyen and Thomas (2019) emphasized that Grade 3 represents a critical juncture in a child's educational journey, where foundational reading skills should be solidified. They pointed out that students who do not achieve proficiency by this stage are at risk of falling behind in subsequent academic years, particularly as the curriculum becomes more complex. Their research indicates that the early identification and support of struggling readers are crucial to preventing long-term academic difficulties.

A significant gap identified in the literature is the neglect of children's perspectives in literacy research. Cole (2019) argued that much of the existing research is adult-centric, focusing primarily on educators' and policymakers' views while sidelining the experiences and opinions of the children themselves. This oversight is particularly problematic because it ignores the insights that children can offer about their own learning processes. Lloyd-Smith and Tarr (2018) echoed this sentiment, asserting that children's voices are essential in shaping effective literacy interventions. They called for a more participatory approach to literacy research, where children are actively involved in the decision-making processes that affect their education.

The inclusion of children's feedback in the development of literacy interventions has been advocated by several researchers. Patel and Lee (2018) highlighted the potential benefits of involving children in the design and evaluation of literacy programs. They found that when children's preferences and experiences are taken into account, the resulting interventions are more likely to be engaging and effective. This approach not only improves the relevance of the content but also fosters a sense of ownership and motivation among students.

In the Philippine context, ongoing concerns about reading comprehension levels among elementary students have been documented. The National Achievement Test (NAT) results, as reported by the NSO Census of Population and Housing, revealed that many Grade 3 students continue to struggle with reading comprehension in both English and Filipino. These findings have been corroborated by Ramirez and Castro (2018), who noted that despite the introduction of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) curriculum, significant challenges in reading comprehension persist. This suggests that while the curriculum may offer benefits, it is not sufficient on its own to address the deeper issues affecting literacy.

The literatures reviewed from 2018 to 2019 points to a growing recognition of the need for a paradigm shift in literacy research. Researchers are increasingly calling for approaches that not only focus on technical solutions to reading difficulties but also consider the broader social and emotional contexts in which children learn. Harris and Wilson (2019) argued for a more holistic approach to literacy development, one that integrates cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning. This perspective is supported by Cole (2019), who emphasized that understanding the lived experiences of children is crucial for developing effective literacy practices.

As the field of literacy research continues to evolve, several emerging trends are noteworthy. First, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy. Patel and Lee (2018) highlighted the need for literacy programs to be culturally relevant and inclusive, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students. This approach is particularly important in multilingual and multicultural contexts, such as the Philippines, where students may face additional challenges related to language and cultural differences.

Second, the integration of technology in literacy education is becoming increasingly prominent. Nguyen and Thomas (2019) explored the potential of digital tools and resources to enhance reading instruction and support struggling readers. They found that technology, when used effectively, can provide personalized learning experiences that cater to individual students' needs. However, they also cautioned that technology should not replace traditional literacy practices but rather complement them.

Finally, the literature suggests a need for more research on the long-term impact of literacy interventions. While many studies focus on immediate outcomes, there is a lack of longitudinal research that tracks students' progress over time. Harris and Wilson (2019) called for more rigorous, long-term studies to better understand the factors that contribute to sustained literacy development.

The literature from 2018 to 2019 reflects a growing awareness of the complexities involved in literacy development and the need for more inclusive and holistic approaches. While progress has been made in understanding and addressing reading difficulties, there is still much work to be done. The persistent challenges highlighted in recent studies underscore the importance of integrating children's perspectives into literacy research and practice. By doing so, educators and policymakers can develop more effective, relevant, and sustainable literacy interventions that truly meet the needs of all learners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the limited availability of research on children's reading perceptions, this study aimed to explore and address this gap by examining the specific experiences of young readers. The following research questions guided the phenomenological inquiry into understanding children's reading experiences:

1. What are children's lived experiences with reading?
2. What strategies may be proposed to address learners' concerns regarding reading?

METHODOLOGY

In phenomenological research, the sampling strategy focused on selecting participants who had direct and significant experiences with the phenomenon of reading. Ten pupils from a Grade III class, aged eight to nine years, were chosen out of 35 students. These pupils were selected based on their ability to articulate their experiences with reading and their willingness to engage in the study. This approach aligns with Creswell's (2018) emphasis on selecting participants who have directly encountered the phenomenon under investigation.

The children's openness and ability to express their lived experiences were essential for gathering rich, detailed data that could answer the first research question. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms, ensuring that the participants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences.

Data Collection

Data collection was structured into four phases, each designed to gather insights into the children's reading experiences and to identify strategies to address their concerns.

Phase One: Observation

The first phase involved building rapport with the children through informal interactions and participation in class activities. These activities, such as listing favorite things to do and engaging in read-aloud sessions, were intended to create a comfortable environment where the children could express their thoughts and feelings about reading. This phase was crucial for understanding the children's lived experiences with reading, directly addressing the first research question (Creswell, 2018).

Phase Two: Continued Observation

The second phase extended the observations to more structured activities, such as writing poems about reading and creating artwork that represented their reading experiences. These activities provided deeper insights into the children's emotional and cognitive connections with reading, further illuminating their lived experiences. The data from this phase contributed to formulating strategies to address the challenges they faced, addressing the second research question.

Phase Three: Interviews

The third phase involved conducting two rounds of individual interviews with the selected pupils. The first interview focused on their personal experiences with reading, while the second interview asked them to reflect on their earlier responses and provide suggestions for

improving reading instruction. These interviews were pivotal in addressing both research questions, as they provided detailed narratives about the children's experiences and their ideas for effective reading strategies (Creswell, 2018).

Phase Four: Focus Groups

The final phase included focus group discussions, which helped validate and expand the findings from the interviews. Separate focus groups for boys, girls, and a mixed-gender group were conducted to explore potential differences in reading experiences and preferences. These discussions were instrumental in gathering additional insights and strategies directly from the children, which informed the recommendations for addressing their concerns about reading. This phase was particularly relevant to the second research question, as it directly engaged the children in proposing solutions based on their experiences.

Throughout the study, the methodology employed triangulation of observation, interviews, and focus groups to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2018). This comprehensive approach provided a nuanced understanding of the children's lived experiences with reading and informed the development of effective strategies to address their reading concerns.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

1. What are children's lived experiences with reading?

Children's lived experiences with reading revealed a spectrum of emotions and attitudes, often reflecting disengagement and dissatisfaction. The analysis identified several key themes:

Reading as a Disengaged Process: Many children perceived reading as a mandatory task rather than a source of enjoyment. For instance, Law felt compelled to read to meet external expectations rather than for pleasure, while Jana and other participants expressed a lack of enthusiasm for assigned reading materials.

This suggests that educational systems need to rethink their approach to reading instruction. Incorporating children's interests and preferences into reading activities could shift their perception of reading from a mandatory task to an engaging pursuit. Tailoring reading materials to align with students' personal interests and providing more choice in reading selections could enhance engagement and enjoyment (Garcia & Cain, 2018).

This perception aligns with findings that reading is often viewed as a chore, leading to disengagement (Ivey & Broaddus, 2019).

Playing the Reading Game: The study found that children often engaged in reading tasks superficially, conforming to expectations without genuine interest. For example, Matthew expressed boredom with reading tasks, while Robert showed impatience with reading-related activities.

To address this issue, educators should design reading activities that foster genuine interest and connection to the material. Strategies that involve interactive, choice-based, and collaborative elements could help shift students' attitudes towards reading from compliance to genuine engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2019).

This reflects a broader issue where children complete reading tasks to fulfill requirements rather than for authentic engagement (Turner, 2018).

Untapped Knowledge: The study revealed that children's perceptions of reading were diverse. Some children, like Billie, expressed a clear dislike for reading, while others, like Jana, displayed enthusiasm during personal interviews. This variability underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of individual reading experiences (Patterson et al., 2019).

Recognizing and addressing individual differences in reading attitudes is crucial. Educators should implement differentiated instruction to accommodate varying levels of interest and ability. Creating opportunities for students to express their preferences and experiences with reading can help tailor educational approaches to better meet their needs (Cambourne, 2018).

2. What strategies may be proposed to address learners' concerns regarding reading?

Several strategies are recommended to address learners' concerns and improve their reading experiences:

1. Align Reading Materials with Interests

Providing reading materials that reflect children's interests can increase their engagement and motivation. Research supports that when children are allowed to choose books that align with their personal interests, they are more likely to be motivated and enjoy reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2019).

Implementing choice-based reading programs in schools can help foster a more positive attitude towards reading. By offering a variety of books that cater to different interests, educators can make reading more appealing and relevant to students.

2. Promote Authentic Engagement

Incorporating reading activities that connect with children's real-life interests and experiences can enhance their engagement. Activities that emphasize choice, challenge, and collaboration are known to boost intrinsic motivation (Turner, 2018).

Schools should design reading programs that include activities allowing for personal connection and creativity. Engaging students in meaningful discussions about their reading experiences and incorporating interactive elements can help cultivate a deeper interest in reading.

3. Adapt Teaching Approaches

Employing diverse teaching methods to cater to different learning styles and preferences can improve reading engagement. Interactive and enjoyable activities should be integrated into the curriculum to accommodate various needs (Cambourne, 2018).

Teachers should be trained to use flexible and varied instructional strategies that can address different learning preferences. Providing professional development on innovative teaching techniques can help educators create more engaging reading experiences.

4. Create Supportive Reading Environments

Building a positive reading culture where children feel supported and encouraged can mitigate negative attitudes towards reading. Positive reinforcement and opportunities for students to share their reading experiences can foster a more supportive environment (Garcia & Cain, 2018).

Schools should focus on creating a supportive and encouraging atmosphere for reading. This includes recognizing and celebrating students' reading achievements and creating spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts about reading.

By implementing these strategies, educators can better address the issues identified in the study, transforming reading from a perceived obligation into an engaging and enjoyable activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools should curate and offer a diverse selection of reading materials that reflect the varied interests of students. Allowing children to choose books aligned with their personal preferences can foster a stronger connection to reading and increase engagement.
2. Develop reading activities that are interactive and connected to real-life experiences. Incorporating elements such as group discussions, creative projects, and interactive technology can make reading more dynamic and engaging.
3. Implement differentiated teaching strategies that cater to various learning styles and abilities. Tailoring instruction to meet individual needs can address diverse reading preferences and improve overall engagement.
4. Establish a classroom culture that supports and encourages reading. This includes providing positive reinforcement, celebrating reading achievements, and creating spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.
5. Integrate regular feedback sessions and reflective activities into the reading curriculum. Encourage students to discuss their reading experiences, preferences, and challenges to better understand their needs and adjust instruction accordingly.

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