

Lived Experiences of Teachers in Addressing Reading Difficulties Among Intermediate Grade Levels: Basis for Professional Development Plan

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of intermediate-grade English reading teachers in addressing learners' difficulties in decoding, fluency, and comprehension at Tugbungan Elementary School and used their insights as the basis for a context-responsive Professional Development Plan. Anchored on the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope, and the Multifactorial Model of Reading Difficulty, the study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design involving nine Grade IV, V, and VI English reading teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using an expert-validated, researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide and analyzed through phenomenological thematic analysis, with member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail supporting trustworthiness. Findings showed that teachers used differentiated strategies based on learners' reading needs, including phonics and word-level instruction for decoding, repeated and guided reading for fluency, and vocabulary support, questioning, story mapping, retelling, and summarizing for comprehension. However, limited time, workload, large class sizes, inadequate reading materials, learner attendance, and uneven home support constrained consistent intervention, while school programs, mentoring, collaboration, resources, and family communication served as enabling supports. The study concluded that effective reading intervention requires both teacher expertise and coordinated school-level support and recommended protected remediation time, appropriate materials, practical professional development, collaborative support, progress monitoring, and realistic school-home partnerships. The study primarily supports SDG 4—Quality Education by promoting responsive reading intervention, teacher professional development, and inclusive learning support. Its sustainability impact lies in strengthening institutional and community capacity through diagnostic literacy profiling, differentiated intervention, professional collaboration, progress monitoring, and sustained school-home partnerships.

Keywords: Differentiated Reading Intervention, Intermediate-Grade English Reading Teachers, Phenomenological Study, Professional Development Plan, Reading Difficulties, School–Home Partnership, Teacher Professional Development

1. Introduction

Reading literacy remains a concern in Philippine basic education, particularly in the intermediate grades where learners transition from learning to read to reading to learn. Difficulties in decoding, fluency, vocabulary as well as comprehension can affect learning across subjects (Hagid & Apostol, 2024; Villaceran et al., 2024). Reading

difficulty is multidimensional, requiring interventions responsive to individual learner profiles (O'Brien and Yeatman (2021); Ziegler et al. (2020)). This study explored the lived experiences of intermediate grade English reading teachers at Tugbungan Elementary School and used their insights as the basis for a context-responsive Professional Development Plan.

Struggling readers may experience different combinations of decoding, fluency as well as comprehension difficulties. Explicit and targeted instruction can strengthen word-level skills (Forné et al. (2022)), while intensive and repeated practice supports reading development (Donnelly et al. (2019); Pindiprolu and Forbush (2024)). Comprehension requires additional support in vocabulary, background knowledge, questioning, retelling as well as summarization (O'Brien and Yeatman (2021); Ziegler et al. (2020)). These findings support differentiated rather than uniform reading intervention.

Teachers identify reading needs, select and adapt strategies, monitor progress as well as manage contextual barriers. Philippine studies describe teachers responding to varied reading profiles through differentiated and locally appropriate practices (García and Doronio (2024); Villaceran et al. (2024)). However, large classes, limited resources, instructional time as well as support needs can restrict intervention (Adao et al. (2023); Hagid and Apostol (2024)). Learner confidence and inclusion are also important, particularly for older struggling readers (Donaire et al. (2024)).

International studies show that structured, targeted as well as sustained interventions can improve reading development (Cancer et al. (2020); Dujardin et al. (2022); Guryan et al. (2014)). Program effectiveness also depends on access, participation as well as appropriate support (Davies et al. (2022); Spears et al. (2024)). Philippine schools use structured programs such as Adopt-A-Struggling Reader (Valdez and Casillan (2024); Maticyeng (2024)), Catch-Up Fridays (Rominimbang et al. (2024)), I-Love-Rary (Vero and Diano (2023)), Project ELECTRA (Golo and Tado (2024)), Project STRIDE (Mercado (2024)) as well as SPARCS (Suplaag et al. (2025)). Community participation through Brigada sa Pagbasa and related initiatives can further extend reading support when coordinated with classroom intervention (Visuyan (2024); Garcia and Ilustre (2024)).

The study is anchored on the Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Reading Rope as well as the Multifactorial Model of Reading Difficulty. The Simple View explains comprehension through the interaction of decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), while Scarborough's Reading Rope describes skilled reading through interconnected word-recognition and language-comprehension strands (Scarborough, 2001). The Multifactorial Model recognizes interactions among learner, instructional as well as contextual factors (O'Brien and Yeatman (2021); Ziegler et al. (2020)). The study follows an Input–Process–Output model in which teachers' experiences, reading difficulties, interventions, barriers as well as supports are examined phenomenologically and used to develop a context-responsive Professional Development Plan.

Existing studies largely focus on learner outcomes, specific interventions, or broad teacher challenges. Although Philippine research documents teachers' experiences and differentiated practices (Villaceran et al. (2024); Gulmayo and Subillaga (2025)), fewer studies examine how intermediate grade English reading teachers integrate interventions across decoding, fluency as well as comprehension while managing everyday classroom conditions. This study addresses this gap by exploring teachers' lived experiences at Tugbungan Elementary School and using their insights to develop a context-responsive Professional Development Plan.

The study aligns primarily with SDG 4 – Quality Education by addressing reading literacy, differentiated intervention, teacher professional development as well as inclusive learning support. Strengthening teachers' capacity to respond to struggling readers contributes to more equitable and responsive educational opportunities. The study contributes to educational, institutional as well as community sustainability by promoting diagnostic literacy profiling, differentiated intervention, progress monitoring, professional collaboration as well as school–home partnership. Community-supported reading initiatives can strengthen continuity of reading support when aligned with learner needs and classroom practices (Visuyan (2024); Garcia and Ilustre (2024)).

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of Grade IV, V as well as VI English reading teachers in addressing learners' difficulties in decoding, fluency as well as comprehension. Phenomenology was appropriate because it examines the essence of shared experiences by describing what participants experienced and how they experienced it (Ayton (2023)). The study was non-experimental and involved no treatment, manipulation, random assignment, or causal comparison.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Tugbungan Elementary School, a public elementary school in the Division of Zamboanga City operating under the Philippine K to 12 curriculum. The school was selected because its intermediate grade teachers directly handle learners with reading difficulties and implement the ARAL Program, remediation activities as well as classroom-based reading routines. The setting provided an information-rich context for examining reading intervention within actual classroom conditions.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The participants were nine intermediate grade English reading teachers, consisting of three Grade IV, three Grade V as well as three Grade VI teachers. They had direct experience addressing learners' difficulties in decoding, fluency as well as comprehension. Although English was the primary language of reading instruction, Filipino or Mother Tongue was sometimes used to clarify meaning, provide instructions, or support struggling readers.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct and information-rich experience of the phenomenon. Participants were required to be Grade IV, V, or VI English reading teachers at Tugbungan Elementary School, have at least one year of intermediate-grade teaching experience, have directly handled learners with reading difficulties as well as be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. Teachers outside the intermediate grades or school and other stakeholders were excluded. The nine participants were considered appropriate based on the relevance and depth of their experiences rather than statistical representativeness.

2.5 Research Instrument

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data collection tool. It gathered contextual information and elicited teachers' experiences, strategies for decoding, fluency as well as comprehension, perceived learner progress, barriers, enabling supports as well as recommendations for improving school-level reading support. The interview guide underwent expert validation by qualified validators with knowledge and experience in English language teaching, reading instruction as well as research methodology. They assessed the clarity, relevance, language, alignment with the research objectives as well as capacity of the questions to elicit meaningful responses. Their recommendations were incorporated before the instrument was finalized.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

After securing authorization from the appropriate education and school authorities, eligible teachers were invited to participate and informed about the study, interview procedures as well as their rights. Informed consent and permission for audio recording were obtained before the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at agreed times and locations, with follow-up questions used when clarification was necessary. The recordings were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy, while identifying information was replaced with participant codes or descriptive pseudonyms. Member checking was subsequently conducted by allowing participants to review summarized interpretations or key points to verify that their intended meanings were accurately represented.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using phenomenological thematic analysis. Transcripts were read repeatedly, significant statements were identified and coded as well as related codes were organized into categories and broader themes concerning teachers' experiences, strategies, barriers, enabling supports as well as recommendations. Textual descriptions represented what teachers experienced, while structural descriptions explained how instructional and contextual conditions shaped their experiences. These were synthesized to determine the shared meaning of the phenomenon. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing as well as an audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development as well as analytic reflections.

2.8 Data Management

Audio recordings, transcripts, research notes, coding files as well as related documents were stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher, with secure backup copies maintained. Identifiers were replaced with participant codes or descriptive pseudonyms, and the data were used solely for the study. Research data were retained for three years after study completion. After the retention period, digital records would be permanently deleted and printed documents securely destroyed.

2.9 Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical principles for research involving human participants. Authorization and informed consent were obtained before data collection, and participants were informed about the study's purpose, interview procedures, voluntary participation as well as their right to refuse questions or withdraw without penalty. A respectful and non-evaluative interview environment was maintained.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Teachers' Adaptations and Reflections in Addressing Reading Difficulties

Teachers described reading intervention as an ongoing part of classroom instruction rather than an activity limited to formal remediation. Grade IV teachers frequently addressed foundational reading difficulties and used oral reading, classroom observation, GST, and Phil-IRI results to determine whether learners needed support in decoding, fluency, or comprehension. Grade V teachers encountered learners with overlapping difficulties,

including inability to decode, slow reading, and fluent oral reading without adequate comprehension. Grade VI teachers experienced greater tension between learners' actual reading abilities and grade-level expectations, with some learners still requiring foundational instruction despite increasing demands for comprehension and independent learning. These experiences demonstrate that teachers continually observed, interpreted, and adapted instruction according to learners' reading behaviors. The coexistence of non-readers, dysfluent readers, and apparently fluent readers with poor comprehension is consistent with Villaceran et al. (2024). The findings extend this observation by showing how learner variability shaped teachers' daily instructional decisions across Grades IV, V, and VI. The distinction teachers made among decoding, fluency, and comprehension difficulties also reflects the Simple View of Reading, particularly the distinction between word recognition and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986).

3.2 Strategies Perceived as Effective and Conditions Supporting Their Use

3.2.1 Strategies for Decoding Difficulties

Teachers used phonics- and word-level interventions when learners struggled with letter recognition, sound blending, CVC words, and longer words. These included the Marungko approach, SATPIN, flashcards, phonetic word families, syllabication, sound-by-sound blending, letter chips, sight-word activities, and sound-letter review. Teachers emphasized assessing learners' actual reading abilities before selecting materials or intervention strategies. These findings are consistent with Forné et al. (2022), who reported improvements following explicit and intensive phonological training targeting specific decoding weaknesses. They also correspond with the structured and focused support described in the Adopt-A-Struggling Reader program, where sustained routines and appropriate texts were associated with improvement (Valdez & Casillan, 2024). The findings further show that teachers combined low-cost decoding strategies according to learner responsiveness and available time and resources.

3.2.2 Strategies for Fluency Difficulties

Repeated and guided reading were the most consistent strategies for learners with fluency difficulties. Teachers used short passages, rereading, teacher modeling, peer reading, guided oral reading, and feedback on pace and expression. These strategies were perceived as more effective when learners received repeated practice with manageable texts instead of relying on unsupported reading. This pattern is consistent with Donnelly et al. (2019), who found that intensive and sustained reading practice supported fluency development, and with Pindiprolu and Forbush (2024), who emphasized repeated practice, immediate feedback, and supported reading opportunities. The findings demonstrate that practice and feedback remained important even when teachers had to provide fluency intervention within limited remediation periods and crowded classroom schedules.

3.2.3 Strategies for Comprehension Difficulties

For learners who could read words but struggled to understand text, teachers used story mapping, guided questioning, vocabulary unlocking, retelling, summarizing, read-stop-question routines, pictures, videos, and structured discussion. These approaches were used when learners had difficulty identifying key ideas, explaining meaning, sequencing events, or answering comprehension questions. These practices are consistent with Apolinario and Dayao (2024), who emphasized structured comprehension support for Grade 6 learners, and Suplaag et al. (2025), whose work on SPARCS highlighted explicit and frequent instruction in inference, summarization, and text structure. The findings also support Scarborough's Reading Rope because decoding and fluency activities strengthened word recognition, while vocabulary, questioning, story mapping, retelling, and summarizing supported language comprehension (Scarborough, 2001). Overall, strategy effectiveness depended not only on the method used but also on appropriate learner-strategy matching, sufficient practice, feedback, suitable texts, manageable grouping, and consistent follow-up.

3.3 Barriers and Enabling Supports Influencing Reading Intervention

3.3.1 Time, Workload, and Class Size

Limited time was the most persistent barrier reported by participants. Reading remediation competed with regular instruction, paperwork, advisory responsibilities, coordinatorship, lesson preparation, and other school duties. Classes of more than forty learners further limited teachers' opportunities to conduct individualized assessment and sustained one-on-one intervention. Consequently, teachers compressed intervention into available periods and relied more on grouping, peer support, short routines, and whole-class adaptations. These findings confirm previous evidence that time, workload, and large classes constrain differentiated reading instruction. Adao et al. (2023) identified large classes, limited resources, and competing instructional demands as barriers, while Rominimbang et al. (2024) observed that remediation periods such as Catch-Up Fridays may have limited effects when learners with intensive needs receive insufficient time. The present findings further demonstrate that these constraints directly influenced the frequency, intensity, and form of intervention teachers could provide.

3.3.2 Reading Materials, Attendance, and Home Support

Teachers reported uneven access to age-appropriate decodable texts, leveled passages, fluency materials, storybooks, vocabulary supports, and content-area texts suitable for older struggling readers. Learner attendance

and home support also influenced intervention continuity. Progress was easier to sustain when learners attended regularly and received reinforcement at home, although families differed in their time, resources, and capacity to provide support. The need for suitable materials is consistent with Adao et al. (2023), who identified inadequate reading resources as a barrier to differentiated support, and Valdez and Casillan (2024), who emphasized structured routines and appropriate materials. The importance of support beyond the classroom is also consistent with Visuyan (2024), who highlighted coordinated volunteer and community assistance, and Garcia and Ilustre (2024), who emphasized school-community structures that extend and normalize reading practice.

3.3.3 School-Based Enabling Supports

Despite these barriers, teachers identified Brigada sa Pagbasa, the ARAL Program, Phil-IRI, remediation activities, school-provided materials, mentoring, colleague sharing, peer coaching, Learning Action Cells, and parent communication as important supports. These mechanisms helped sustain intervention and reduced dependence on individual teacher effort. The findings indicate that structural conditions influenced whether teachers could provide individualized assistance, maintain adequate practice, use appropriate materials, and monitor learner progress consistently. Although school-based supports partially reduced these constraints, they did not eliminate them. Effective reading intervention therefore requires organizational conditions that protect instructional time, provide usable resources, encourage collaboration, and strengthen continuity between classroom intervention and support beyond school.

3.4 Influence of Learner, Instructional, and Contextual Factors

Participants encountered heterogeneous reading difficulties. Some learners struggled with letter recognition, sound blending, CVC words, and multisyllabic decoding; others could decode but demonstrated slow reading and weak expression, while some read fluently aloud but struggled with key ideas, meaning, and comprehension questions. Teachers responded accordingly through phonics, blending, syllabication, and word-level instruction for decoding; repeated and guided oral reading for fluency; and story mapping, vocabulary support, questioning, retelling, and summarizing for comprehension. However, these instructional responses were shaped by class size, time, workload, resources, attendance, home support, school programs, and collegial or administrative assistance. The heterogeneity of reading difficulties is consistent with O'Brien and Yeatman (2021), who describe reading difficulty as multifactorial, and Ziegler et al. (2020), who emphasize that different learner profiles require different instructional emphases. The interaction among learner needs, instructional responses, and contextual conditions also supports the Multifactorial Model of Reading Difficulty. Across grade levels, foundational decoding and word-recognition concerns appeared more frequently among Grade IV teachers, while Grade V and VI teachers increasingly encountered comprehension demands alongside unresolved decoding and fluency difficulties. Although this pattern must be interpreted cautiously because of the small, single-school phenomenological sample, the findings indicate that grade promotion did not automatically resolve earlier reading gaps.

3.5 Teacher-Informed Recommendations for Strengthening Reading Support

Teachers recommended protected remediation time, manageable workload and clearer support structures, appropriate and age-respectful reading materials, continuous practical professional development and collaboration, and stronger but realistic school-home reading partnerships. They emphasized that intervention should not depend on leftover periods or teachers' individual efforts. Teachers also valued mentoring, peer coaching, Learning Action Cells, demonstration teaching, material sharing, and case-based professional discussion. For families, they favored brief and practical home-reading activities that recognized differences in parents' available time and capacity. These recommendations directly reflect the barriers and enabling conditions identified in the findings. Protected intervention time is consistent with Valdez and Casillan (2024), who emphasized protected schedules and structured routines, and Rominimbang et al. (2024), who identified limitations when remediation time is insufficient. The need for suitable reading resources is also supported by evidence that intervention is more workable when materials correspond with learners' actual reading profiles (Adao et al., 2023; Valdez & Casillan, 2024). Similarly, realistic school-home partnerships align with Visuyan (2024) and Garcia and Ilustre (2024), who emphasized organized and accessible family and community participation. Overall, the recommendations favor a school-level response combining teacher capacity-building with organizational conditions that sustain intervention.

3.6 Synthesis as Basis for the Professional Development Plan

Across the findings, teachers' effectiveness in addressing reading difficulties depended on the alignment of three elements: accurate identification of learner needs, appropriate instructional responses, and school conditions that permit consistent implementation. Six priority areas emerged from the participants' experiences: diagnostic literacy profiling, differentiated reading intervention, progress monitoring and regrouping, collaborative professional support, school-home reading partnership, and a sustainable school-level reading support system. These findings provide the basis for the proposed Professional Development Plan. Rather than focusing solely on increasing teachers' knowledge of reading strategies, the plan addresses shared diagnostic practices, appropriate strategy matching, manageable progress monitoring, professional collaboration, continuity with families, and organizational conditions supporting intervention across Grades IV, V, and VI. Collectively, the findings

demonstrate that intermediate-grade reading intervention is adaptive, differentiated, collaborative, and context-dependent. Effective intervention therefore requires both teacher expertise and structural and relational supports that enable appropriate practices to be implemented consistently.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concludes that reading intervention in the intermediate grades is an ongoing, diagnostic, responsive, and differentiated process in which teachers adjust instruction according to learners' difficulties in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Effective intervention depends on matching appropriate strategies with learners' reading needs and providing sufficient guided practice, feedback, suitable materials, and follow-up. However, teacher competence and commitment alone cannot ensure consistent intervention because limited time, large class sizes, workload, inadequate materials, learner absenteeism, and uneven home support affect its frequency, intensity, and individualization. Thus, addressing reading difficulties requires both differentiated teaching and coordinated school-level support. The proposed Professional Development Plan responds to these needs through diagnostic literacy profiling, differentiated reading intervention, progress monitoring and regrouping, collaborative professional support, school-home reading partnership, and sustainable school-level reading support.

The study recommends strengthening intermediate-grade reading intervention through coordinated support from education authorities, school leaders, teachers, families, and the community. Schools should provide protected remediation time, manageable implementation demands, appropriate and age-respectful reading materials, practical professional development, mentoring, peer collaboration, and realistic school-home reading support. Teachers should continue using assessment-informed and differentiated strategies based on learners' decoding, fluency, and comprehension needs, supported by guided practice, feedback, and manageable progress monitoring. School and instructional leaders should strengthen technical assistance, coaching, material sharing, and collaborative professional learning, while parents and community partners should provide practical reading reinforcement aligned with classroom instruction. Future research should examine similar experiences in other settings, include perspectives of other stakeholders, and implement and evaluate the proposed Professional Development Plan to determine its feasibility, implementation quality, and outcomes.

The study was limited to the lived experiences of nine intermediate-grade English reading teachers from Grades IV, V, and VI at Tugbungan Elementary School; therefore, the findings represent the experiences and conditions within this specific school context and should not be assumed to represent other schools or districts. The study focused primarily on teachers' perspectives and did not directly include the perspectives of learners, parents, school leaders, reading coordinators, or specialists. In addition, the Professional Development Plan developed from the findings remained a proposed intervention and was not implemented or evaluated within the scope of the study; consequently, its feasibility, implementation quality, and effects on teacher practice or learner reading outcomes were not established.

5. Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study received no external funding. The researcher acknowledges the nine intermediate-grade English reading teachers and Tugbungan Elementary School for their participation and institutional support. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and data were collected through non-invasive semi-structured interviews while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed.

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