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Lived Experiences of Struggling Readers in Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of struggling readers in junior high school. This study was limited to four (4) participants who were under frustration reading level and had repeated grade 7. It was very particular with the lived experiences of the participants which resulted in their difficulties. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological study was the basis of this study. In light of the findings, the following conclusions were drawn. Participants in this study experienced difficulties such as emotional, academic, and behavioral problems. However, through this phenomenon, the participants were able to cope by emotion-focused mechanisms which were considered as poor coping mechanisms wherein the participants opted to exert effort to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. One coping strategy that emerged was Physical Distancing wherein participants distance themselves from the things or people that give them stress or move away from a threat. Another coping mechanism exemplified by the participants was the Emotional Distancing strategy wherein struggling readers move away emotionally. It was likely that experiences, themes, techniques, and strategies described by students in this population would give teachers a new outlook from which they can enhance learning outcomes. The following recommendations were laid down: the use of a holistic approach in reading intervention since struggling readers experience difficulties in different aspects of life such as emotional, academic, and behavioral aspects; conducting a phenomenological study on the life of elementary struggling readers is also recommended since there is a much bigger number of struggling elementary readers in some regions in the country.

INTRODUCTION

As the world continues to be globalized, the demand for a highly-skilled and competitive workforce arises, resulting in a requirement for greater literacy skills. With this, each state around the world makes ways to comply with this demand.

In the Philippine setting, Republic Act No. 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education of 2013 mandates the right to quality education. Section 2 or the Declaration of Policy clearly explicates that the state shall provide a basic education that is aligned to people's and country's needs, and that will produce competitive workers locally and globally.

In line with this, the Philippine government gives much priority to making Filipino workers equipped with essential skills to work in any part of the world. Thus, several government programs promoting literacy were established. The Department of Education (DepEd), as a distinct agency that is responsible for stimulating literacy, targets the learners in schools as their main priority. However, despite the importance of literacy skills in learning and consequently, in academics, many students are still struggling particularly in reading and in understanding texts.

Based on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018, the Philippines projected the lowest score in reading comprehension among all 79 participating countries and economies. DepEd Secretary Leonor Briones linked this phenomenon to the poor results of NAT in the past few years (Philippine Star, 2019).

Under the initiative of the Bureau of Elementary Education, an agency under the Department of Education that assures quality in elementary education, the Philippine Reading Informal Inventory, or PHIL-IRI was used to measure the reading proficiency of students. Using this tool, teachers are able to identify struggling readers or students who have difficulty comprehending texts.

However, diagnosing readers with frustration level and giving interventions would not be enough to fully address the problem. As Luz (2007) claimed, the Phil-IRI is not a powerful tool for assessing students' reading levels because of its inaccuracy. She assessed that the design or plan of a reading program should not only be based on the result of the Phil-IRI assessment and that other bases may be considered. The researcher believes that delving into the lived experiences of struggling readers would shed light on the phenomenon of being a struggling reader beyond academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The deficiency in literacy skills is a big challenge faced by the Filipinos. Despite the efforts that the government and Department of Education are making to improve the quality of education, there are still students who manifest such deficiencies in literacy skills, particularly in reading. The use of Phil-IRI to determine the strengths and weaknesses of students in reading paves the way for diagnosing struggling readers who need more assistance. Specifically, students who were diagnosed with poor reading skills are categorized as frustration readers.

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In studies and literature presented, poor skill in reading affects students' academic performance. Students who have difficulty comprehending texts also have trouble understanding other lessons, manifest poor academic performance, have a big chance of having poor working skills, and have delinquent behavior in the future.

Across the school years anywhere in the world, reading has been viewed as a critical skill that children need to acquire and develop.

In some countries like the Philippines, children's interest in reading has started to decline, resulting in poor mastery of reading and weak academic performance. The Philippine government claimed that the poor comprehension of Filipino students is a reality that they must investigate and must be considered in improving the system of education (Merez, 2019).

According to research and pieces of literature, one way to rekindle or boost learner's enthusiasm to read and study is to enhance the motivation that would push learners to engage in different reading activities. As defined by various linguists and psychologists, motivation is the reason why students do a certain task.

As stated in the studies gathered, learning and acquisition of different literacy skills like reading can be explained through different theories. Such theories proposed by the experts are the Cognitive Development Theory which talks about the correct practices for development like constructing and reconstructing of what the child has learned to come up with authentic learning and lastly, the schema theory which pertains to the prior knowledge that helps readers comprehend easily what they are reading. John Piaget as the proponent of cognitive development theory used the term schema in describing the building blocks of knowledge that learners use in reading and comprehending texts. According to Pappas (2014), schema theory claims that readers use their pre-existing knowledge and prior experience to decode a text.

Reading as a complex task comprises of many processes and when we speak of a certain process within reading, we can identify one reading model. According to the experts, there are three main reading models. The first model of reading is the Top-Down Theory which focuses on the prior knowledge and experiences of the readers. The second is the Bottom-Up Theory wherein learning is based on habit formation that is created through the association of stimulus with response. Lastly, the Metacognitive or Interactive Theory which explains the role of two reading models: the Top-Down and Bottom-Up Theory.

Bandura's concept of positive psychology emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy and resiliency to students in accomplishing tasks successfully. Learners who have a high level of self-efficacy and resiliency have a high probability of being successful academically.

This study benefited different people in society related to education such as teachers, and administrators who have the desire to understand the situation of struggling readers who are also often academically challenged. The purpose

of this study was to shed light on the phenomenon of being a struggling reader beyond academic performance. Because of the little phenomenological research done concerning the experiences of struggling readers in school, there was a need to conduct a broader range of studies on this topic.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to understand phenomena in terms of meanings that people carry to them" (Creswell,1998,15). Qualitative research focuses on people, their experiences, and how the experiences answer the questions about a research topic (Creswell, 2013). Also, qualitative research focuses on naturalistic inquiry (Creswell, 2013). The characteristics of qualitative research are useful in studies of people and their experiences, like what the researcher showed in her study about struggling readers in junior high school.

Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a "thing" what it is and without which could not be what it is. Giorgi (2009) points out that when someone says something, there is always more meaning in what was said than even the speaker is aware of, in the natural attitude.

For this study, the phenomenological approach was appropriate because it highlighted the experience and understanding of struggling readers with poor academic performance in junior high school. According to van Manen (1990, 2014), phenomenology of practice provides a descriptive (phenomenological) understanding of individuals' lived experiences.

Data for this study was obtained from individual, in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher with informants' lived experiences. The length of time to conduct each interview was based on the time length of the informant in answering questions. The researcher avoided giving questions that led the informants to give compelled responses. Additionally, the researcher was careful in developing questions that would guide the interview without steering the dialogue in a particular direction.

The researcher asked the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of Grade 7 struggling readers in Junior High School?
2. How do the struggling readers understand their experiences?
3. How do the struggling readers cope with the effects of the phenomenon?

The researcher also recorded all the interviews using the recorder on the phone and made notes during each interview. Next to the checking of data from each participant was the crafting of themes which lessened the details in the data. After being transcribed, the data was printed and checked.

Data Analysis

For this study, Giorgi (1985) 4-step method to Phenomenological Data Analysis incorporated

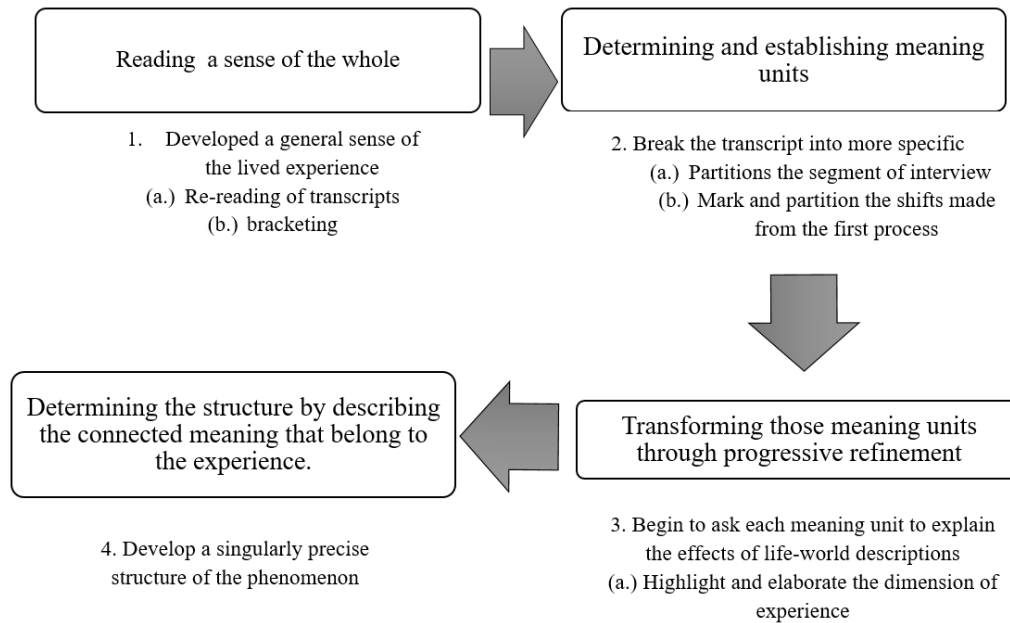


Figure 1: Data Analysis Steps

within Todres and Hollaway’s (2004) Empirical-Phenomenological Framework (Christensen, 2017) was used in analyzing the data. As defined by Giorgi (2003), data analysis is the process of reviewing the data from transcripts of the interviews and identifying themes. The method of analysis involved four essential steps such as the following:

Reading a Sense of the Whole

Giorgi (1985) proposed that reading as a whole gives the reader “openness” and global sense to the narrative. Thus, in this scientific method, the researcher developed a general sense of the lived experience. Re-reading of the transcripts was not only done on this stage to develop meaningful themes but also the “phenomenological reduction” in the form of bracketing. Giorgi (1985) cleared the importance of “phenomenological reduction” to achieve the sense of whole (Christensen, 2017). The researcher applied bracketing while re-reading the transcriptions to temporarily suspend her personal beliefs and judgments that might affect the wholeness of the phenomenon.

Determining and Establishing Meaning Units

After re-reading the transcripts and doing bracketing, the researcher broke the transcripts into more specific and smaller descriptive account by partitioning the segments of interviews gathered while being cautious not to sacrifice the most important part on this process which is the meaning of the experience. The researcher also marked and partitioned the shifts made from the first process until this transforms into a collection of natural meaning units.

Transforming Those Meaning Units Through Progressive Refinement

Giorgi (1985) describes this stage as the beginning of

asking each meaning unit to explain the effects of the life-world descriptions or simply make the analysis fruitful. For this to happen, the researcher highlighted and elaborated the dimension of experience or simply, the researcher articulated the transcripts into a phenomenological specific language. Christensen (2017) defined this process as the development of natural meaning units as well as the identification of central meaning unit themes from the second stage. Once meaning units have been outlined, the researcher went through all the meaning units, which were still expressed in the concrete language of the participants, reflected on them and then came up with the essence of the experience of the participant. The researcher also transformed each relevant unit into the language of psychological science.

Determining the Structure by Describing the Connected Meanings that belong to the Experience

The main goal on this process is to develop a singularly precise structure of the phenomenon. Following the use of imaginative variation on these transformed meaning units, the researcher developed a consistent statement regarding the structure of the participants’ experience.

Ethical Considerations

Since the students who participated in this study were all minors, the researcher needed the active consent of the parents of the participants so, a letter asking for a permit to let their child participate in the study was given to them. After collecting the parents’ consent, the researcher started to identify the most convenient time for the informants to have the interview. The informants were also reminded of their choice to quit anytime if they were uncomfortable, and they were never forced to participate in the study. To establish rapport with the informants, the researcher first asked for some basic information on the informants before scheduling the next two interviews.

The researcher also reminded the informants throughout the study that all information they provided would be strictly confidential. With this, the researcher decided to use codes for the names of the informants to keep their privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to search for common essences experienced by participants of a shared phenomenon. The informants in this study shared their experiences of struggling in reading with poor academic performance. By seeking and hearing informants' subjective encounters and how they made sense of these occurrences, this research gained a better understanding of their lived experiences and how they cope with the phenomenon.

Three research questions guided the study.

What are the Experiences of Struggling Readers with Poor Academic Performance in Junior High School?

The experiences of the struggling readers in junior high school in the phenomenon revealed its result from the actual semi-structured interview. It was found that three major themes emerged relative to the participants' responses, namely: difficulties of struggling readers, sources influencing struggling readers' experiences, and emotion-focused coping mechanisms.

How Do the Struggling Readers Understand Their Experiences?

The results of the conducted interviews revealed that struggling readers in junior high school understand their experiences through the theme emerged: sources influencing struggling readers' experiences. The informants noted that many sources influenced their experiences with respect to the phenomenon they are within.

How Do the Struggling Readers Cope with the Effects of the Phenomenon?

The participants learned to overcome the effects of the experiences from the phenomenon. Through the face-to-face interview, the informants revealed how they cope with the situation they are in, and this was categorized into one theme: Emotion-focused Coping Mechanisms such as Physical and Emotional Distancing. Through these coping techniques, the struggling readers in junior high school were able to face the demands of the phenomenon. All of them shared how they distanced themselves and their emotions in dealing with stress and overcoming difficulties as struggling readers.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study added a unique perspective to the existing body of literature on students in Junior High School who are struggling in reading and with poor academic performance. This section is meant to connect

the previous research and theories with the findings of this study.

Self-efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy is a natural trait of humans that characterizes believing to their own abilities to overcome challenges and finish tasks productively (Akhtar, 2008) as mentioned by (Ackerman, 2018).

As shown in this study, the participants admitted that they often get failing scores in their tests and quizzes which was a sign of poor level of self-efficacy. Gilroy (2013) stated in her study, that self-efficacy is a major challenge for struggling readers in many cases and that giving remediation to such students would be helpful to make them feel successful. She also stresses in her study that class remediation has a positive impact on students because it could promote resiliency which is interrelated with self-efficacy and is important to be successful.

Resilience Theory

Another theory related to self-efficacy that was also applicable to this study is resilience. Bandura (2008) asserts that failures are important to develop resilience.

In the case of the participants in this study, their resilience level is undeniably poor. Most of them said that they just enrolled again because their parents wanted them to do so. With that, it can be inferred that these students lack resiliency. After experiencing failure from the previous school year, these students decided to continue their studies and enrolled again in grade 7 not because they wanted it but because other people wanted it for them.

Coping Mechanism

Coping mechanisms are the techniques that people use in facing stress and/or trauma to handle painful emotions or problematic situations (Bailey, 2022). In this study, the participants who have the inability to read fluently and proficiently experienced stress in life. For once, they needed mechanisms or techniques to cope with the difficulties and taxing situations that they were experiencing. It was noted in this study that struggling readers tend to avoid problem-focused coping mechanisms in dealing with their stressors and prefer an emotion-based coping strategy. Specifically, the participants manifested the use of physical and emotional distancing. Instead of doing actions that would resolve their conflict, they regulated their emotions and just thought that conflict would be resolved without doing anything like in their most common dilemma which is bullying. Struggling readers who were bullied just remained silent and distant and avoided confrontations with their stressors.

CONCLUSIONS

The result of this study showed that students who struggled to read experienced a lot of difficulties in life. Such difficulties pertain to the lived experiences of the participants and therefore were crafted as one of the main themes. This study revealed how struggling readers

in junior high school were affected by their situation. Current literature clearly depicts the reality of reading deficiencies in the Philippines. Albano Jr. (2018) claimed that some grade 7 students in the Philippines could barely read and this was evident in the conducted research as the participants shared their difficulty in reading. In this study, several problems of struggling readers in junior high school were identified by the researcher such as Emotional Problems, Academic Problems, and Behavioral Problems.

It was observed that participants' inability to read fluently and proficiently put them in stressful situations like being bullied, shaming through receiving hurtful words and comments, and sometimes physical hurt like beating and punching which led to different emotional problems.

These stressful situations were identified to contribute more difficulties to the learning success of struggling readers. Sonnenschein, Stapleton, & Benson, (2010) as cited in the study of Cerda, Im, *et al.* (2014) claimed that a poor foundation of literacy skills in the early years of studying may lead students to low academic performance. This assertion was reflected in the participants' poor academic performance and failing grades that resulted in their repetition of grade level. In the informants' shared experiences, it was also discovered that students who struggle in reading manifested behavior that often needs more attention from teachers and sometimes distracts classes. It was noted in the interview with the participants that they were often reprimanded by their teacher because of being talkative and misbehaving in class. Ministry of Education, Guyana (2016) supported this claim as they explained that children who exhibit behavior problems invariably require extra attention.

This study contributed to the larger existing body of literature about the experiences of struggling readers in junior high school. This supported the claims of some studies about the importance of motivation to students, especially those who are struggling with reading. Just like the proficient students, struggling readers also appreciate praise and need motivation to do well in class. Although most struggling readers like the informants involved have experienced so much failure that made them think success is impossible for them like repeating grade 7 after failing from the previous school year, being motivated to do school tasks like reading was still possible with the help of some people. Various studies that have been established pertaining to students' attitudes and learning workplace posit that reading and motivation are interrelated to each other (Becker *et. al*, 2010) as cited in (Gable, 2014). It was evident in this study that struggling readers feel motivated to do better in class and in performing tasks like reading if they get praise and encouraging words. More so, they appreciate every effort that their teachers, classmates, and family give to them, especially in resolving their dilemma in doing academic tasks. As cited by Lambert (2014) teachers could still do something to regain learner's motivation that has been lost due to failures.

It was clear that struggling readers like them were

mainly motivated by extrinsic motivation and deficiency in intrinsic motivation was observed as they failed to do school tasks with the same level of enthusiasm. Some studies supported the disadvantages and negative effects of too much extrinsic motivation and deficiency of intrinsic motivation. (Deci, *et. al* (2000) as cited in Yang, *et. al*, (2018) said that students who are motivated extrinsically have the possibility to focus more on the reward and appreciation of reading, and in that case, their motivation also has a big chance to diminish. Moreover, as extrinsically motivated students tend to concentrate on the reward and recognition associated with reading, their intrinsic interest in reading can be considerably reduced (Yang, *et. Al* 2018). Generally, students' reading skills depend on the intrinsic motivation that they have within themselves (McGeown, 2014). Literature supports that children who are intrinsically engaged in reading will have deeper learning and understanding than those who are extrinsically motivated with only the least interest in what they are reading will have a superficial understanding. Ericksen (2016) claimed the benefits of intrinsic motivation. In her study, she explained that internal motivation creates a deeper and vast impact on the learner because the reason for learning is from the learner itself. Thus, intrinsic motivation is more personal and beneficial to the learner because the learner has the free will to decide for himself depending on his own desires and intentions. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation or getting rewards is only temporarily helpful to the learners because their motivation is not from themselves. This assertion was supported by the interviewed participants as they expressed their seldom interest and desire to practice reading and do better in class after receiving praise from others. The majority of them asserted that they continued their studies and sometimes were inspired to do school tasks because of encouraging words they got from people who care for them like family, friends, and teachers. With this, it can be inferred that they are doing things or tasks like reading or re-enrolling in grade 7 not because they want it for themselves, but most likely others want it for them.

Furthermore, it was also revealed in this study that students with reading difficulty need social support from their family, friends, and teachers. Based on the responses of the participants, they need adequate attention, time, guidance, and supervision from their parents. All the participants noted their wish to go home to see their mom and have a lot of time to teach them to read. They said that they will be more motivated to read books if the person who will teach them is their mother. It can be concluded from this that the great and strong combination of motivation and social support could have a great impact on the success of struggling readers. However, strong motivation and social support alone would not be enough to help the struggling readers holistically. A high level of students' self-efficacy – their belief to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments and resilience or the ability to

cope after failure is also necessary to achieve academic success and therefore must also be enriched in struggling readers. According to Haas, (2017), students' awareness that they are efficacious in mastering and controlling their own learning leads to ample motivation in achieving their goals in reading or in any tasks. Moreover, Henk, Melnick (1995) as cited in Hedges (2014) explained that learners who considered themselves skilled in reading most likely enjoy reading activities and processes. Contrastingly, learners who are passive in reading tend to avoid any activity or process associated with reading which often leads to low reading achievement or poor grades in class. Wigfield et al., (2016) explained in their study the importance of self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to finish certain tasks in learning. For instance, students can perform better when they are conscious of their self-efficacy or when they feel and believe that they are efficacious in accomplishing tasks. On the other hand, with respect to the responses of the participants, it was found that self-efficacy and resilience in doing tasks and handling stressful events were very much lacking in them and affected them drastically as a whole. Specifically, self-doubt, poor self-esteem, and negation in doing school tasks like reading were very evident in them as they distant themselves physically and emotionally from their stressor instead of having a high level of optimism in accomplishing tasks that could result in a better academic performance. Undeniably, struggling readers like the participants have the big possibility to use poor coping mechanisms as they lack motivation, support system, self-efficacy, and resilience. It was also noted in the study that reading problems are not only limited to the technical learning of reading but also the emotional problems of the students for which their present ineffective coping is merely physical and emotional withdrawal. It was seen in the study that through distancing, struggling readers were able to manage their emotional responses to an uncontrollable situation and believe that problem will be solved without exerting much effort. This claim was supported by Marinak, Gambrell (2008) as cited in Alhamdu (2016), students who are not motivated to read will always find ways to escape doing any reading activity. Thus, a combination of problem-based coping mechanism and emotion-based coping mechanisms for struggling readers would be a healthier and much better way of coping with stressful events or situations.

This study also supported the idea that reading problems are not the only dilemma of struggling readers. Beyond their difficulty reading fluently and proficiently, there are more stressful situations they need to handle and difficulties they need to go through. However, in every difficulty that they have experienced, there are ways or techniques to cope and be better. This study helped them to be better understood in society by looking into their lived-experiences. Additionally, it provided further support to the existing literature that suggests that the findings can help educators understand and address the needs of struggling readers so they may adapt and/or

improve existing intervention reading programs. Above all, this study served as a guide to the Department of Education, school heads, teachers, and other agencies or centers associated with education in designing intervention plans with a holistic approach for students who struggle with reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of this qualitative research, the following recommendations are created:

1. The researcher recommends the use of a holistic approach in reading intervention since struggling readers experience difficulties in different aspects of life such as emotional, academic, and behavioral aspects. The holistic approach to teaching reading may help struggling readers develop a love of reading.
2. Secondly, a one-on-one approach in reading intervention is recommended for struggling readers because of their adequate need for guidance and supervision.
3. Aside from focusing on giving remediation to struggling readers, creating programs that would help struggling readers strengthen their self-efficacy and resilience, making use of their social support system with family and friends, and the awareness of the reading teachers of the holistic nature of the reading problem is much recommended since such factors have shown great impact on the success of students.
4. Conducting a phenomenological study on the life of elementary struggling readers is also recommended since there is a much bigger number of struggling elementary readers in some regions of the country.

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