A Phenomenological Study of the Under-Skilled Learners on Reading and Numeracy through Distance Learning: Case of Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT: Numerous challenges have arisen during this time, including issues with connectivity and access to online materials. Educational psychology can provide valuable insights to sustain education during periods of school closures, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the effectiveness of online learning has been a topic of discussion, as face-to-face instruction cannot be replicated entirely online.

Tackling poverty in education at the elementary level requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the social, economic, and educational needs of disadvantaged students and their families. Students from these backgrounds may face academic struggles and find it difficult to keep pace with their peers.

The current study, which is descriptive in nature, suggests a significant decline in the average competency scores of fifth-grade students in reading and numeracy. These findings supplement previous research on the development of individual competency, which revealed a greater reduction in competency levels during the initial wave of the pandemic

KEYWORDS: Learning Competencies, COVID - 19, Reading Speed, Numeracy

INTRODUCTION

In developing countries, education is a crucial social service provided by the government, and it plays a key role in supporting sustainable economic growth over time and in decreasing poverty levels. The role of education in transmitting culture across generations is essential, and its quality and effectiveness are critical in fulfilling this function. In recognition of this vital role, the government is consistently making significant efforts to ensure that quality education is available to everyone.

In todays' generation, the emergence of COVID-19 has caused significant changes in people's lives, impacting various aspects of human life. One of these is the education sector, which has been greatly affected due to government regulations on social distancing and gatherings to prevent the spread of the virus. As a result, online learning has become prevalent. The effects of COVID-19 have been widespread, affecting students, teachers, and educational institutions worldwide (Mailizar et al., 2020).

The conduct of online classes had been problematic for many students. Numerous issues, problems, and challenges have emerged like problems on connectivity and availability of online materials (Agapito et al., 2021). Moreover, the effectiveness of online learning had surfaced as an issue because face-to-face instruction could never be parallel to online learning. But one of the increasing concerns today was the competencies of the students towards online learning as well as the issues related to curriculum design, assessment, and the availability of appropriate learning materials and resources.

Problems that arise in the learning process refers to the lack of basic resources and necessities that hinder the ability of students to learn effectively in public elementary school as observed by the teachers. These resources may include adequate nutrition, access to medical care, a safe and stable home environment, and appropriate learning materials such as textbooks, technology, and educational tools. Students who experience poverty in these areas may struggle academically and face challenges in keeping up with their peers. Addressing elementary poverty in education requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the social, economic, and educational needs of disadvantaged students and their families.

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the advent of distance learning has reshaped the traditional classroom paradigm, providing unprecedented opportunities for accessibility and inclusivity. As we navigate this digital frontier, it becomes imperative to shine a spotlight on those learners who may face unique challenges in acquiring foundational skills, specifically in

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reading and numeracy. This phenomenological study embarks on a journey to delve into the lived experiences of under-skilled learners within the context of elementary education, examining their encounters with distance learning (Huth, 2022).

The cornerstone of a student's academic career is their elementary education, and future academic success is built on their ability to read and calculate. But not every student sets out on this adventure with the same set of abilities. By elevating the voices of less experienced students, this research aims to highlight the complex difficulties that these students face when learning remotely. Through the use of a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to translate the essence of the experiences of the under-skilled learners, offering a comprehensive understanding of their challenges, success, and how distance learning affected their educational paths. The researchers attempted to go beyond simple statistical analysis by exploring the subjective domain of these learners' perceptions, feelings, and lived realities through the lens of phenomenology.

The elementary school setting serves as the backdrop for our exploration, recognizing the pivotal role it plays in shaping the educational narrative of each learner. As we navigate the uncharted waters of distance learning, this research aimed to determine the rise of under-skilled phenomenon on reading speed and numeracy of public school fifth graders in District 2, Plaridel Elementary Schools. This study hopes to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing debate about distance learning and its implications for under-skilled learners in elementary schools by addressing these issues. The researcher anticipate to foster a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all by meticulously examining individual narratives and identifying potential avenues for intervention and support.

Problem of the Study

This research aimed to determine the rise of under-skilled phenomenon on reading speed and numeracy of public school fifth graders in District 2, Plaridel Elementary Schools. *Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions.*

1. How are the competencies of the public school fifth graders be measured in terms of:
   1.1 Reading Speed; and
   1.2 Numeracy
2. What are the observations and perceptions of the public school elementary teachers on the distance learning approach?
3. What intervention program may be developed based on the findings of the study?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive-normative method in order to determine the level of competencies of the fifth graders in public elementary schools on reading and numeracy. A descriptive-normative survey is a research technique that merges two distinct methods: gathering information to depict the objective of the study in its current or past state, as well as evaluating the object to recognize possible ways to enhance it. Descriptive research can be helpful in identifying intervention programs that can be used in normative research to suggest improvements. Through the course of evaluating and recognizing the level of competencies of the elementary students, one may acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the objectives of study, which can help identify areas for improvement and facilitate the development of more effective strategies.

Research Locale

The observational research study was conducted in the District 2 of Plaridel comprising the following public elementary schools, to wit: Bintog, Parulan, San Jose, Bulihan, and Liciada during the school year 2022 – 2023.

Respondents of the Study

The participants of the study involved selected teachers from public elementary school of District 2, Plaridel Bulacan. The below table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the teachers who have participated in the afore said study:

Table 1. Gender Distribution of Public Elementary Teachers of Dist. 2, Plaridel, Bulacan

Elementary School	Frequency			
	Male	%	Female	%
Bintog	2	10	17	17.2
Parulan	4	20	22	22.2
San Jose	5	25	17	17.2

Bulihan	2	10	15	15.2
Liciada	7	35	28	28.2
Total	**20**	**100**	**99**	**100**

Research Instrument

The evaluation tool used in the study was a self constructed questionnaire that assessed the level of reading and numeracy of the elementary students. The rubrics used were categorized as advanced, proficient, developing, emerging and beginning. The description of which can be seen in Table 2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the month of March 2020, the closure of schools for months due to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a disruption in regular education in the Philippines. This study aimed to determine the comprehension of fifth grader student competencies in public elementary school by examining their level of competencies in reading and numeracy in District 2, Plaridel, Bulacan.

Table 2. Fifth Grade Assessment on their Competencies on Reading and Numeracy in Dist. 2, Plaridel, Bulacan

Descriptive	Rubrics on Reading	f	%	Rubrics on Numeracy	f	%
ADVANCED	I can identify details from the text. I can give insightful evidence to support my conclusions and to make inferences. I can interpret unfamiliar words based on context	3	0.7	Students demonstrate advanced ability to view the situation mathematically. Approach representation is effective and is easy to follow. Reasoning and evidence is clear and well presented.	2	0.5
PROFICIENT	I can identify the main idea and details about the text. I can give evidence from the text to support conclusions. My ability to make inferences is limited as I can understand familiar words, but I have trouble interpreting new words.	27	7.0	Students demonstrate proficient ability to view the situation mathematically. Approach or representation is sensible and generally can be followed. Reasoning or evidence contains minor inconsistencies.	34	8.9
DEVELOPING	I can identify the main idea and a few details about the text. I struggle to provide evidence and make inferences. I can understand familiar words when they are used in familiar contexts.	82	21.4	Students demonstrate developing ability to view the situation mathematically. Approach or representation is difficult to follow. Reasoning or evidence is lacking to some degree.	84	22
EMERGING	My ability to interpret individual words significantly limits my understanding of the text. I can identify the main idea of the text, but I cannot give details or textual evidence to support conclusions about the text	123	32.2	Students demonstrate basic ability to view the situation mathematically. Approach or representation is ineffective. Reasoning or evidence is absent.	165	43
BEGINNING	I cannot understand the words in the text well enough to be able to identify the main idea or any details about the text.	148	38.7	Ability to view the situation on a very limited scope. Approach or representation is very ineffective. Reasoning and evidence is nil.	98	25.5
Total		N=383	100		N=383	100

The reading and numerical abilities of fifth-grade students who were assessed in 2020 were marginally weak as seen from Table 2. The observed variations among the groups are consistent with anticipated outcomes resulting from the distance learning that arises as the teaching modality during the pandemic times, and higher rates of absenteeism during the face to face (F2F) classes (Sosu & Klein, 2021). These observations were expected to impede students' ability to learn and hinder their progress, likely due to reduced time spent on educational activities, fewer opportunities for peer interactions, and limited direct instruction and feedback from teachers (Andrew et al., 2020; Grewenig et al., 2021).

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Observations and perceptions of the public elementary teachers were collated and summarized as follows: Educational psychology can provide useful suggestions for sustaining education during distance or online learning, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. These recommendations may involve essential steps but may also require significant financial investments. Huber and Helm (2020) suggest that digital infrastructure at numerous schools in the Philippines could benefit from enhancement to facilitate distance learning and digitally enhanced education overall. Likewise, the utilization of formative online assessments appears to be a promising strategy for keeping students engaged while schools are closed. Meeter (2021) and Spitzer & Musslick (2020) found through empirical research conducted during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that formative assessments resulted in improved performance compared to traditional classes in previous years, especially for older students. Nevertheless, the precise causal relationships are uncertain due to the self-selection of samples and interventions serving as both the assessment of competencies and the outcome, leading to potential methodological effects. Overall, it is necessary to modify learning and teaching approaches to suit distance learning and prioritize cognitive engagement, student assistance, and classroom administration (Voss & Wittwer, 2020).

Moreover, extensive research has established a comprehensive database of factors that contribute to effective teaching, including the provision of high-quality learning tasks, the provision of effective feedback, and ensuring that students spend adequate time on tasks. The researcher proposes that comparable aspects are equally important in the context of remote education (Muijs, 2021). According to Andrew and colleagues (2020), one of the difficulties faced in distance education is encouraging students to stay engaged and providing them with feedback while schools are closed to F2F classes. To ensure successful remote teaching and learning, schools need to be equipped with advanced technology. Effective school management can support quality teaching by establishing clear communication channels, dependable digital infrastructure, and resources that can aid students' learning, irrespective of their home environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal a marginal weakness in the reading and numerical abilities of fifth-grade students assessed in 2020, aligning with the anticipated outcomes of distance learning during the pandemic. The observed variations among groups can be attributed to the challenges posed by this teaching modality, coupled with higher rates of absenteeism during face-to-face classes. These challenges, including reduced time for educational activities, limited peer interactions, and constrained direct instruction and feedback from teachers, were expected to impede students' learning progress. The collated observations and perceptions of public elementary teachers underscore the significance of educational psychology in providing valuable suggestions for sustaining education during distance or online learning, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations, such as enhancing digital infrastructure, utilizing formative online assessments, and modifying learning and teaching approaches to prioritize cognitive engagement and student assistance, emerge as essential strategies for addressing the challenges posed by distance learning.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of factors contributing to effective teaching, such as providing high-quality learning tasks, effective feedback, and ensuring sufficient time on tasks. The researchers advocate for the relevance of these factors in the context of remote education, emphasizing the need for advanced technology, clear communication channels, and dependable digital infrastructure to support successful remote teaching and learning. Ultimately, the comprehensive database of factors contributing to effective teaching, coupled with a proactive approach to adapting learning and teaching approaches to suit distance learning, emerges as critical components in overcoming the challenges posed by the shift to remote education, especially during times of school closures and disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION

The study's findings suggest a marginal weakness in the reading and numerical abilities of fifth-grade students assessed in 2020, echoing the expected outcomes of distance learning during the pandemic. The observed variations among groups can be attributed to challenges associated with this teaching modality, coupled with higher rates of absenteeism during face-to-face classes. These challenges, including reduced time for educational activities, limited peer interactions, and constrained direct instruction and feedback from teachers, were anticipated to impede students' learning progress.

In response to these challenges, several recommendations emerge. First and foremost is the imperative to invest in digital infrastructure to improve the quality and accessibility of distance learning. This encompasses ensuring reliable internet connectivity, providing necessary devices for students, and enhancing the overall technological capabilities of educational institutions. Additionally, the study advocates for the utilization of formative online assessments as a strategy to keep students engaged and monitor their progress during remote learning.

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Furthermore, the findings underscore the need to adapt teaching methods to suit the demands of distance learning, emphasizing cognitive engagement, interactive learning activities, and student assistance to create a more dynamic virtual learning environment. Incorporating insights from educational psychology is recommended to provide support for teachers, students, and parents during distance learning, addressing motivational issues, ensuring effective communication, and fostering a positive learning environment.

Establishing clear communication channels between teachers, students, and parents is crucial for enhancing transparency and understanding in the virtual learning space. Effective school management practices that prioritize the needs of remote learners, including providing resources, professional development opportunities for teachers, and creating a supportive framework for successful distance education, are also recommended.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of promoting equitable access to educational resources for all students, regardless of their home environment. This involves targeted interventions to support disadvantaged students and address the digital divide. Encouraging collaboration between educators, policymakers, and technology experts is highlighted to continually improve and innovate in the realm of distance learning through the sharing of best practices, conducting research, and implementing evidence-based strategies.

Lastly, the study recommends providing comprehensive training programs for teachers to enhance their proficiency in delivering remote education. This training should cover technological tools, pedagogical strategies for online instruction, and methods for maintaining student engagement in virtual environments. The study concludes by advocating for the implementation of a continuous monitoring and evaluation system for distance learning programs to assess their effectiveness regularly. Through these recommendations, educational stakeholders can work towards creating a more resilient and effective educational system capable of navigating challenges posed by disruptions and ensuring continued learning for all students, irrespective of the learning environment.

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