

Determinants of Reading Difficulties Among Grade 7 Students at San Pascual National High School: Basis for an Intervention Program

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Abstract

This study examined the determinants of reading difficulties among Grade 7 students at San Pascual National High School as a basis for an intervention program. Anchored on Schema Theory, Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, and the Simple View of Reading, the study explored how learner background and environment influence reading performance. A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was employed involving 36 Grade 7 non-reader students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a validated researcher-made questionnaire and analyzed using frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and Pearson r correlation. Findings revealed that learners generally demonstrated positive interest and motivation toward reading but exhibited limited prior knowledge and reading experiences. The school environment was found to be supportive, particularly through teacher guidance and availability of materials, while the home environment showed minimal support due to limited parental involvement and reading practices. Learners experienced significant difficulties in phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and affective response, with vocabulary and comprehension identified as the most challenging areas. The study further revealed a strong and statistically significant relationship between learners' background and reading difficulties ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.05$) and between learners' environment and reading difficulties ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.05$). These findings indicate that both individual and contextual factors significantly influence reading performance. The study recommends targeted intervention programs focusing on reading skills development, enhancement of prior knowledge, and strengthened collaboration between schools and parents. This study aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by addressing literacy challenges and improving learning outcomes, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by highlighting socio-economic disparities in reading performance. It contributes to educational and socio-economic sustainability by supporting evidence-based literacy interventions and promoting inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: Affective Response to Reading, Learner Background, Learner Environment, Phonemic Awareness, Reading Comprehension, Reading Difficulties, Reading Fluency, Vocabulary Knowledge

1. Introduction

Reading proficiency is a fundamental academic skill that supports learning across disciplines and contributes to cognitive development and academic success. However, many learners, particularly during the transition to secondary education, experience persistent reading difficulties in decoding, fluency, and comprehension (Figuerras, 2025). These challenges are influenced by cognitive, linguistic, socio-economic, and environmental factors, which affect learners' academic performance and self-efficacy. This study examines the determinants of reading difficulties among Grade 7 students at San Pascual National High School, focusing on learner background and environment as bases for an intervention program.

1.1 Reading Difficulties among Grade 7 Students at San Pascual National High School

Reading involves complex processes beyond word recognition, including fluency, comprehension, and interaction with cognitive and environmental factors. Difficulties in these areas hinder academic achievement and reduce learners' confidence. Globally, determinants such as phonological processing, working memory, and instructional context influence reading performance (Carroll et al., 2025). In the Philippine context, reading challenges persist despite literacy initiatives, with issues in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension linked to home environment and access to materials (Maglunob & Tabernilla, 2023; Famoso et al., 2025). Studies report significant reading difficulties among Grade 7 learners, particularly in word recognition and comprehension (Figuerras, 2025; Deleña, 2025). At San Pascual National High School, similar difficulties are observed, especially in decoding multisyllabic words and understanding texts. Understanding these determinants is essential for developing targeted instructional strategies and intervention programs suited to learners' needs.

1.2 Cognitive, Linguistic, and Environmental Determinants of Reading Difficulties

Literature highlights that reading development is multidimensional, involving cognitive, linguistic, affective, and environmental factors. Foundational skills such as phonemic awareness and decoding are critical for reading acquisition (Yépez-Moreno et al., 2025; Snowling et al., 2020), while vocabulary knowledge significantly influences comprehension (Perfetti & Stafura, 2021; Zhang & Koda, 2023). Reading comprehension requires both lower-level decoding and higher-order cognitive processes (Kim, 2020; Kim, 2021), and is further influenced by morphological awareness and language skills (Müller and Brady, 2025). Fluency enables efficient processing of text, directly impacting comprehension (Kuhn et al., 2021). Affective factors such as motivation and anxiety also shape reading engagement (Torppa et al., 2020; Grills-Taquechel et al., 2021). Socio-economic status and environmental factors, including access to resources and parental involvement, strongly affect reading outcomes (Romeo et al., 2022; OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Local studies reinforce these findings, showing that Filipino learners' reading difficulties are influenced by socio-economic conditions, motivation, and limited literacy exposure (Department of Education, 2023; Bernardo, 2020; Danganan and Laguador, 2021). Additionally, challenges in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension remain prevalent (Dulay and Abadiano, 2022; Barrot, 2021). Overall, reading difficulties arise from the interaction of learner characteristics, cognitive skills, and environmental conditions.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Reading Difficulties in Secondary Education

Globally, reading difficulties are recognized as a major educational concern influenced by cognitive and environmental variables (Carroll et al., 2025). International frameworks emphasize the importance of balanced instruction and supportive learning environments (Castles et al., 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Nationally, Philippine data indicate persistent literacy challenges, with many learners performing below proficiency levels (Department of Education, 2023) and functional literacy disparities linked to socio-economic status (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated reading difficulties due to limited access to learning resources (UNICEF Philippines, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Locally, studies highlight that reading performance is influenced by school and home environments, including teacher support and parental involvement (Enomar & Fernal, 2025); (Kadusale & Tepacia, 2025). At San Pascual National High School, learners face similar contextual challenges, emphasizing the need for localized interventions.

1.4 Theoretical Foundations of Reading Difficulties Based on Learner Background and Environment

This study is grounded in three major theories. Schema Theory explains that comprehension depends on prior knowledge and experiences (Bartlett, 1932). Learners with limited background knowledge struggle to construct meaning from texts. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and support from teachers and parents (Vygotsky, 1978). Limited home support restricts learners' development despite school assistance. The Simple View of Reading posits that comprehension results from decoding and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Deficits in either component lead to reading difficulties. These theories collectively explain that reading difficulties arise from cognitive, social, and skill-based factors, supporting the need for a holistic intervention approach.

1.5 Research Gaps on Learner Background, Environment, and Reading Difficulties among Grade 7 Students

Despite extensive research, studies focusing specifically on Grade 7 learners in localized secondary school contexts remain limited. Existing interventions often emphasize skill remediation without addressing socio-economic conditions, learner background, and environmental influences. Findings indicate that learners experience difficulties in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, while also facing limited parental support and resource constraints. Although school support exists, insufficient reading time and home reinforcement persist. This study addresses these gaps by examining the combined influence of learner background and environment and proposing an intervention program that integrates cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors.

1.6 Alignment of the Study on Reading Difficulties with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with several SDGs. SDG 4 (Quality Education) is directly supported by addressing reading difficulties and improving literacy outcomes. SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) is relevant as the study highlights disparities in reading performance linked to socio-economic status. Additionally, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is indirectly supported, as literacy development enhances future employability and productivity. SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is reflected in the emphasis on collaboration among schools, families, and communities in improving literacy outcomes.

1.7 Multidisciplinary Sustainability Importance of Addressing Reading Difficulties among Grade 7 Learners

This study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by addressing literacy gaps that affect educational attainment and future opportunities. It supports educational sustainability by promoting evidence-based interventions to improve reading proficiency. It also contributes to community sustainability by encouraging collaboration between schools, families, and stakeholders in supporting learners. Furthermore, the study enhances policy and institutional sustainability by providing data-driven insights for educational planning and program development. By integrating cognitive, environmental, and

motivational factors, the study offers a holistic approach to improving literacy, which is essential for long-term educational and societal development.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive–correlational research design to examine the determinants of reading difficulties among Grade 7 students. The descriptive aspect focused on presenting the demographic profile of the respondents, including age, sex, elementary school graduated from, socio-economic status, and parents' educational attainment. It also described learners' background in terms of interest in reading, motivation, prior knowledge, and reading experiences, as well as their environment in terms of school and home conditions. Furthermore, the study assessed reading difficulties in phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and affective response to reading. The correlational component determined whether significant relationships exist between learners' profile, background, environment, and their reading difficulties using Pearson r correlation. This approach aligns with the explanation of Creswell and Creswell (2018), who stated that quantitative research examines relationships among variables using numerical data, and Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2019), who emphasized that descriptive research presents group characteristics while correlational research identifies relationships without manipulation. This design enabled objective analysis of variables and provided empirical evidence for developing an intervention program.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at San Pascual National High School, located in Barangay Bolod, Municipality of San Pascual, Province of Masbate, Philippines. The school serves learners from several barangays and operates within a community where most families depend on farming and fishing. The school provides junior and senior high school education and continues to develop its facilities and resources to support students' learning needs.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of 36 Grade 7 students enrolled at San Pascual National High School during the conduct of the study. These students were identified as non-readers and were selected because they directly experience reading difficulties and are actively engaged in classroom reading activities.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling, specifically criterion-based sampling, to select participants. Only Grade 7 students identified as non-readers based on the Phil-IRI reading assessment were included. This approach ensured that respondents met the specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. All 36 identified students participated, and all questionnaires were retrieved, resulting in a 100% retrieval rate, which strengthened the reliability and validity of the data collected.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, researcher-made survey questionnaire developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on reading development and difficulties. The instrument consisted of sections covering respondents' demographic profile, learners' background, learners' environment, and reading difficulties in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and affective response. A four-point Likert scale was used to quantify responses, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Prior to administration, the instrument underwent expert validation to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Revisions were made based on expert feedback to improve its reliability and validity.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The research followed a systematic process beginning with the development and approval of the research proposal. The questionnaire was then developed and validated by experts. Permission to conduct the study was secured from the Schools Division Superintendent and the school head. After approval, the researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the respondents, providing clear instructions and sufficient time for completion. All responses were collected on the same day, ensuring completeness. The data were then encoded, recorded, and tabulated for analysis, with the assistance of a statistician to ensure accurate interpretation of results.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilized statistical tools to analyze the data. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the demographic profile of the respondents. The weighted mean was applied to determine the levels of learners' background, environment, and reading difficulties. Pearson product–moment correlation (Pearson r) was used to determine the significant relationship between learners' background, environment, and reading difficulties. All statistical analyses were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance to ensure the validity of the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Determinants of Reading Difficulties

3.1.1 Demographic Profile of Learners

The results showed that the majority of the respondents were 13 years old, accounting for 77.78%, while 22.22% were aged 14 years and above. In terms of sex, 58.33% were male and 41.67% were female. Most students graduated from San Pascual Central School (41.67%), followed by Laurente Elementary School (25.00%), with the rest coming from other feeder schools. All respondents belonged to low socio-economic status (100.00%). Regarding parents' educational attainment, most fathers had only reached elementary level, while most mothers had completed high school, with very few parents attaining college education. These findings suggest that the majority of learners are within the expected age level but with some variation that may reflect differences in academic progression. OECD (2021) reported that students within the appropriate age-for-grade tend to show consistent academic engagement, while older students may experience learning gaps. The slight predominance of male respondents aligns with UNESCO (2020), which noted that male students often demonstrate lower reading engagement. The diversity of elementary schools supports the findings of World Bank (2022), which emphasized that differences in prior schooling influence reading readiness. The uniform low socio-economic background reinforces UNICEF (2021), which highlighted that learners from low-income families often face limited access to literacy resources. Additionally, the low educational attainment of parents supports Asian Development Bank (2021), which found that limited parental education reduces the level of academic support provided at home.

3.1.2 Learners' Interest and Motivation to Read

The results revealed that learners generally showed a positive interest in reading, with an overall agreement level. They reported enjoying reading, feeling happy when reading interesting texts, and liking to learn new words. However, they disagreed on choosing reading during free time and participating in school reading activities. In terms of motivation, learners demonstrated overall agreement, with strong agreement on being encouraged by teachers and feeling motivated by reading progress. However, they showed low agreement in setting personal reading goals. These findings indicate that while learners possess moderate interest and motivation, their actual engagement in reading activities remains limited. Guthrie et al. (2020) found that positive attitudes toward reading do not necessarily translate into active engagement without structured opportunities. Similarly, Education Endowment Foundation (2021) emphasized that teacher encouragement significantly enhances reading motivation, supporting the strong influence of teachers observed in the study.

3.1.3 Prior Knowledge and Reading Experiences

The results showed that learners generally disagreed with all indicators related to prior knowledge and reading experiences, including familiarity with vocabulary, understanding text topics before reading, guessing word meanings, recalling previous lessons, and relating texts to personal experiences. The overall level indicated limited prior knowledge. This suggests that learners lack sufficient background knowledge and reading experiences, which may hinder comprehension and engagement with texts. International Literacy Association (2020) emphasized that prior knowledge is essential for understanding texts, as learners with limited exposure to vocabulary and concepts struggle with comprehension. This supports the observed difficulties among the respondents.

3.2 Learners' Environment

3.2.1 School Environment

The results indicated that learners generally agreed that the school environment supports reading. They strongly agreed that teachers guide them and that reading activities are interesting, and they agreed that materials are available and peers provide encouragement. However, they disagreed on having enough time for reading during school hours. These findings suggest that while instructional support and resources are present, time constraints limit effective reading practice. OECD (2021) highlighted that teacher guidance and supportive classroom environments enhance reading development, which aligns with the study. However, limited instructional time remains a challenge that affects reading improvement despite available support.

3.2.2 Home Environment

The results showed that learners generally disagreed that their home environment supports reading. While they agreed that reading materials are somewhat available, they disagreed on parental encouragement, shared reading, having a quiet reading space, and regular reading habits at home. This indicates that the home environment provides minimal support for literacy development. UNESCO (2022) reported that the home literacy environment is a strong predictor of reading achievement, and lack of parental involvement significantly contributes to reading difficulties. This supports the study's findings on weak home-based reading support.

3.3 Specific Reading Difficulties Experienced by Learners

3.3.1 Phonemic Awareness

The results revealed that learners strongly agreed that they experience difficulties in phonemic awareness, including sounding out unfamiliar words, making mistakes in oral reading, confusing similar sounds, and pronouncing new words. This indicates that learners have weak decoding skills, which directly affect their reading ability. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2020 update) emphasized that phonemic awareness is a foundational reading skill, and deficiencies in this area lead to decoding problems, supporting the study's findings.

3.3.2 Vocabulary Knowledge

The results showed that learners strongly agreed that they experience vocabulary difficulties, including confusion with unfamiliar words, difficulty remembering new words, and inability to use vocabulary in sentences. This suggests that vocabulary limitations significantly hinder comprehension and language use. International Literacy Association (2021) emphasized that limited vocabulary is a major barrier to comprehension, reinforcing the findings that learners struggle to understand texts due to unfamiliar words.

3.3.3 Reading Fluency

The results indicated that learners strongly agreed that they experience difficulties in reading fluency, including slow reading, frequent pauses, difficulty maintaining pace, and inability to complete reading tasks on time. This implies that learners struggle with reading speed and smoothness, which affects comprehension. National Reading Panel-based updated studies (2020) found that fluency is critical for comprehension, as slow reading limits cognitive processing, supporting the observed challenges.

3.3.4 Reading Comprehension

The results showed that learners strongly agreed that they experience comprehension difficulties, including trouble understanding texts, remembering details, answering questions, and summarizing content. This indicates that comprehension is a major area of difficulty. (World Bank, 2022) reported that many learners struggle with basic comprehension skills, including summarizing and interpreting texts, which directly supports the study's findings.

3.3.5 Affective Response to Reading

The results revealed that learners strongly agreed that they experience negative emotional responses to reading, including frustration, anxiety, and loss of interest, while also agreeing that they feel bored and tend to avoid reading. This suggests that emotional factors significantly influence reading performance and engagement. (American Psychological Association, 2020) found that anxiety and frustration reduce reading motivation and performance, supporting the study's findings on affective barriers.

3.4 Relationship Between Variables

3.4.1 Relationship Between Learners' Background and Reading Difficulties

The results showed a strong positive linear relationship between learners' background and their reading difficulties, with a computed r-value of 0.68, which exceeded the critical value at a 0.05 level of significance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that learners' background factors, including socio-economic status, prior knowledge, and home support, significantly influence their reading difficulties. (Reardon et al., 2021) found that socio-economic background and home literacy environment strongly affect reading achievement, supporting the study's conclusion.

3.4.2 Relationship Between Learners' Environment and Reading Difficulties

The results revealed a strong positive linear relationship between learners' environment and their reading difficulties, with a computed r-value of 0.76, which exceeded the critical value at a 0.05 level of significance, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis. This suggests that environmental factors such as classroom conditions, instructional support, and home environment significantly affect reading performance. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) highlighted that supportive and resource-rich learning environments improve literacy outcomes, while limited environments contribute to reading difficulties, which aligns with the study's findings.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study revealed that Grade 7 students at San Pascual National High School generally come from low socio-economic backgrounds with parents having low to moderate educational attainment, which may influence their access to learning resources. Although learners demonstrated positive interest and motivation toward reading, their engagement in reading activities and prior knowledge remained limited. The school environment was generally supportive through teacher guidance and available materials, but limited reading time persisted, while the home environment showed minimal support due to low parental involvement and weak reading practices. Learners experienced significant reading difficulties across phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and affective response, with vocabulary and comprehension identified as the most challenging areas. Furthermore, there was a strong and statistically significant relationship between learners' background and reading difficulties, as well as between learners' environment

and reading difficulties, indicating that both individual and contextual factors significantly influence reading performance.

Based on the findings, schools may design targeted support programs for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, including the provision of reading materials and activities that involve parents. Teachers should enhance learners' reading interest and motivation through engaging activities and by encouraging independent reading both in school and at home. Schools may also allocate more time for reading activities, while parents should be encouraged to create a supportive home reading environment. Furthermore, teachers may implement targeted intervention programs focusing on phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and comprehension skills, including activities that build prior knowledge and reading experiences. Strengthening collaboration between schools and parents is also recommended to ensure consistent support for learners, along with the implementation of structured reading intervention programs that include guided home reading activities and regular monitoring of learners' progress.

The study is limited to 36 Grade 7 students from San Pascual National High School, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. It focuses only on selected variables such as learners' background, environment, and specific reading difficulties, and does not include other potential factors such as instructional methods or broader cognitive variables. Additionally, the data were collected within a specific time frame and setting, which may reflect only the conditions and experiences of the respondents during that period.

Compliance with ethical standards

The study followed a systematic research process to ensure validity, reliability, and adherence to ethical standards throughout its conduct. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent and the school head prior to data collection. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the respondents, ensuring proper guidance and accurate data collection within the approved setting.

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