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Empowered or Not: English Teachers' Lived Experiences in Teaching Struggling High School Readers

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Abstract: Reading is a fundamental skill vital to academic success, cognitive development, and lifelong learning. Despite its significance, a substantial number of high school students continue to face challenges in reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The World Bank's 2022 data on learning poverty revealed that approximately 90% of Filipino children aged 10 cannot read or understand a simple text. Recognizing the critical role teachers play in literacy development, this study emphasized the need to amplify their voices in creating more effective interventions and support systems for teachers and struggling readers. This qualitative phenomenological research explored the lived experiences of English teachers in teaching struggling high school readers at Balibago Integrated High School in the Division of Santa Rosa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected nine participants and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method. The study revealed ten (10) superordinate themes and forty-three (43) subordinate themes describing the challenges faced by English teachers when teaching struggling readers, their pedagogical strategies and approaches, professional growth, and career advancement opportunities in managing the demands and challenges in teaching struggling high school readers, and practical recommendations for teachers handling struggling readers. The study concluded that English teachers faced several challenges in teaching struggling high school readers, including internal and external impediments to reading development. Teachers also employ various strategies to address reading difficulties and engage struggling readers. Moreover, teachers identified professional development opportunities and their advantages in teaching struggling readers.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, English Teachers, Struggling High School Readers, Reading Difficulties, Demands and Challenges

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1. Introduction

Reading is a fundamental skill essential for academic success, cognitive development, and lifelong learning. It enhances students' critical thinking, comprehension, and analytical abilities, enabling them to engage with complex texts across various subjects such as science, history, and literature. Recognizing the significance of literacy, the United Nations included Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) four, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Despite efforts to advance literacy, reading difficulties remain a persistent challenge among students in the world, particularly in the Philippines.

Numerous studies emphasized the importance of reading proficiency in fostering student success. However, a lot of high school students continue to struggle with fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Reading difficulties are generally defined as lower-than-expected reading success based on age, cognitive development, and learning potential

(Rohimah, 2021; Gedik & Akyol, 2022). Meanwhile, Thangarajathi & Menaha (2020) stated that children who developed reading difficulty despite low early cognitive risk had some fundamental cognitive skills, more task avoidance, and read less than the children who did not have reading difficulty.

Overall, reading difficulties are challenges that hinder students from achieving the expected level of reading success based on their age and cognitive development. With these, the issue of struggling readers in high school in the Philippines is significant. According to the World Bank's 2022 data on learning poverty, at least 90% of Filipino children aged 10 struggle to read or understand a simple text. Similarly, a study conducted by Urbano et al. (2021) highlighted that a lot of high school students struggled to recognize different patterns of development in texts, evaluate the coherence, organization, grammar, and mechanics of a text, and need better vocabulary knowledge.

Students' reading skills visibly worsened with the shift in education from face-to-face classes to distance learning as a result of COVID-19, which created a significant dilemma for learners. For two consecutive assessments from the 2018 and 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that the Philippines continuously ranks in the bottom 10 out of the 79 and 81 respectively participating countries and faces challenges in reading proficiency which is one of the crucial skills for academic success. In the 2022 PISA, Filipino students only scored an average of 347 points in reading, much lower than the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) average of 476. With this, no significant improvement was seen from the previous PISA in 2018. The PISA results align with the problems of the students' reading difficulties in the Philippines. These reading difficulties hinder students' ability to engage and comprehend complex texts, which can impact their learning potential. As a result, it is imperative for the Philippines to take action and put more emphasis on how critical it is to advance SDG four (4).

To address these challenges, various national and local initiatives were implemented, such as PHIL-IRI, Catch-up Fridays, EDCOM 2, and the National Reading Program. By giving value to programs that promote literacy, it ensures the importance of Sustainable Development Goal Four, which guarantees inclusive and equitable education for all. While numerous studies have explored reading interventions and literacy programs, limited research focuses on the lived experiences of English teachers who directly implement these strategies. Their insights into the challenges, instructional approaches, and opportunities in teaching struggling high school readers remain underexplored.

With the current problem, an opportunity opened up for the teachers to amplify their lived experiences, which would help them discover and explore a variety of information that would help create better interventions and other programs that would benefit the struggling readers. Teachers play an essential role in teaching reading, and their responsibilities include a variety of strategies and approaches to promoting literacy. By improving literacy rates and providing targeted support for struggling readers, we can ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

2. Methods

To achieve the goal and purpose of this study, the researcher used a qualitative method of research, applying a phenomenological research design. This study determined and described the lived experiences of English teachers in Balibago Integrated High School in teaching struggling high school readers; therefore, a phenomenological research design would be most fit. The primary purpose of phenomenological research is to seek reality from the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). By phenomenological design, the study aimed to

gather in-depth narratives about the lived experiences of English teachers and identify strategies, approaches, and opportunities to improve struggling readers' reading abilities.

The participants of the study were composed of nine English teachers who teach struggling high school readers from Balibago Integrated High School in the Division of Santa Rosa City. The school was selected due to its documented number of struggling readers. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select the participants based on the sample population.

The following criteria were used to choose participants:

1. Participants must be currently teaching English at the high school level and should have at least two years of experience in teaching, which can contribute to a richer understanding of the challenges and strategies that evolve with teaching experience.
2. Participants must have experienced working specifically with struggling readers.

The study utilized in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a researcher-made interview protocol guide containing research questions that are open-ended. In an interview, participants are asked a limited number of unstructured, typically open-ended questions designed to elicit their thoughts and ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Since the interview guide protocol was self-made and not standardized, validation from various experts would be necessary. The study interview protocol guide was composed of nine (9) questions exploring the lived experiences of the English teachers, including the challenges they faced, strategies, and opportunities they utilized in managing the demands and challenges of teaching struggling high school readers.

The researcher used Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis to extract the themes from the responses of the participants in the interviews with regard to their experiences in teaching struggling high school readers. The process of data analysis began with the familiarization of data, where the researcher read every transcript of the participants multiple times to gain an understanding of the English teachers' experiences in teaching struggling high school readers. After familiarizing with the data, the researcher identified the significant statements that have direct relevance to the phenomenon being investigated. Then, the researcher formulated meanings that involved examining the statements to understand the underlying meaning of what the participants expressed. The formulated meanings were clustered into themes based on their similarities, differences, or relationships to the experiences shared by the participants. Using the themes identified, the researcher was able to develop an exhaustive description of English teachers' lived experiences. Afterward, the researcher condensed an exhaustive description into short statements that highlighted the essence of the participants' experiences and focused on the key challenges they faced.

To ensure the accuracy of the findings, the researcher returned to the participants of the study and sought validation or verification of the fundamental structure that highlighted key themes and interpretations. Each participant received a copy of the results or summary, either through email or scheduled in-person meetings.

Informed consent forms were made available to the participants, and these contained all the information that the participants needed to know about the study, such as their rights as participants, their freedom to choose to participate or not, the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and the measures that were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data. With these, the purpose of the study was disclosed to the participants.

The researcher also committed to upholding the provisions of the Philippines' Data Privacy Act of 2012 or Republic Act No. 10173, which safeguards the fundamental human right of privacy while ensuring the responsible exchange of information to foster innovation and development. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act, participants' identities were treated anonymously, and any personal information was securely stored

and protected. As a result, every piece of information gathered was treated with the highest confidentiality.

3. Results

Summary of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Table 1. Themes on Struggling Readers.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Students' Internal Struggles in Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor Reading Comprehension • Limited Word Recognition • Weak Phonetic Understanding • Reluctance in Learning • Feelings of Shame and Pressure • Personal Struggles • Lack of motivation in Attending Classes
2. External Impediments to Reading Skill Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of Family Support and Guidance • Insufficient Reading Materials and Facilities • Distant Location from School • Financial Constraints • Early Exposure to Gadgets
3. Teachers' Perceived Experiences with Struggling Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenged by Emotional Drawbacks • Passion as Driving Force to be Persistent • Additional Workload as Hindrance to Monitor Students' Improvement • Unpredictability of Success Rate
4. Difficulties in Teaching Struggling Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Self-Esteem of Students • Students' Disinterest in Reading • Slow Reading Progress • Inadequate Parental Guidance and Support • Lack of Teaching Materials and Resources
5. Perceived Successful Experiences of Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notable Improvement in Reading Skills Through Continuous Practice • Observable Increased in Student's Interest in Reading and Learning
6. Challenging Experiences in Teaching Struggling Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boosting Morale of Students • Perceived reluctance of students to learn
7. Helpful Teaching Strategies with Struggling Readers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonics and Word Recognition • Modeling and Repetition • Anchored Instruction • Peer Tutorial • Parental Support
8. Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seminars and Trainings About Reading Program and Specialized Capacity Activities • Self-Directed Learning • Peer Mentoring and Collaboration • Pursuing Post-Graduate Education
9. Advantages of Professional Development Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and Enhance Teaching Competency • Recalibration of Teaching Strategies • Building Connection with Students

10. Practical Recommendations for Teachers Handling Struggling Readers

- Understanding Students' Context and Agency
- Designing Appropriate Student-Centered Strategies
- Engage in Capacity Building Training and Seminars
- Reflect empathy as a Core Teaching Value
- Strengthen Connection with Students, Parents and Colleagues
- Optimized and Improve Reading Materials and Facilities

In this research, ten (10) clustered superordinate themes discuss the overall lived experiences of English teachers focusing on the challenges, approaches, and opportunities of teaching struggling high school readers. These themes include the following: (1) students' internal struggles in reading; (2) external impediments to reading skill development; (3) teachers' perceived experiences with struggling students; (4) difficulties in teaching struggling readers; (5) perceived successful experiences of teachers; (6) challenging experiences in teaching struggling readers; (7) helpful teaching strategies with struggling readers; (8) professional development opportunities for teachers; (9) advantages of professional development engagement; and (10) practical recommendations for teachers handling struggling readers.

4. Discussion

The analysis of the data uncovered key findings that directly address the research problems. These findings provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of English teachers in teaching struggling high school readers.

Theme 1: Students' Internal Struggles in Reading

Students face a complex combination of internal struggles that hinder their reading development, primarily rooted in poor comprehension, limited word recognition, and weak phonetic awareness. Supporting this observation, Mihret & Joshi (2025), found that a substantial portion of students struggle with essential reading comprehension skills, such as understanding vocabulary, identifying main ideas, and making inferences. English teachers highlighted that a lot of students struggle to understand texts, decode unfamiliar words, and manipulate phonetic sounds, often due to lack of motivation, reluctance to participate, inconsistent practice, or even personal struggles. Additionally, emotional and motivational factors such as lack of initiative, fear of failure, shame, and personal life distractions significantly hinder students' willingness to engage in reading activities. Most students are unmotivated, avoid intervention programs, and experience low self-esteem or anxiety during reading tasks. Students who have higher intrinsic motivation tend to participate more actively in reading activities and intervention programs, leading to better reading outcomes (Wang et al., 2020).

Theme 2: External Impediments to Reading Skill Development

In addition to internal struggles, external forces significantly also hinder students' reading progress. These include lack of parental support, limited access to reading materials, school distance, financial constraints, and early exposure to gadgets—all of which can negatively affect students' reading competence. Taña & Tantiado (2024), emphasized that eliminating distractions is essential for enhancing pupils' comprehension and fostering their confidence in reading. Parental involvement is a crucial factor in reading development. Without encouragement and reading support at home, students often develop poor attitudes toward reading, resulting in lower engagement and slower progress. When parents take an active role in their child's reading development, they can

spark a genuine interest in books and foster a positive attitude toward reading. This engagement often leads to improved reading skills and overall academic success (Librea et al., 2023). Insufficient reading resources and inadequate facilities in schools also limit students' exposure to diverse texts. Well-maintained school facilities foster greater student engagement, leading to improved reading comprehension (William et al., 2025). Long travel distances and financial constraints discourage attendance in remedial reading sessions, even among students who are willing to improve. Digital distractions such as online games and social media applications have become a growing concern since it reduces students' focus in achieving reading development. This aligns with the findings of Mondal (2024), where digital distractions, such as social media and gaming, affect students' academic performance and mental well-being.

Theme 3: Teachers' Perceived Experiences with Struggling Students

English teachers consistently report emotional drawbacks and mental distress resulting from high expectations, slow student progress, and the recurring need to revisit foundational reading skills such as phonetic awareness and word recognition. In line with this, teachers' well-being directly impacts their effectiveness in the classroom, shaping students' mental health, safety, and overall academic success (Emeljanovas et al., 2023). With a lot of them shared feelings of frustration as they have continuously been placed in challenging situations describing their experiences as "challenging". Despite these challenges, teachers remain deeply committed and passionate, drawing motivation from their belief in the desire to see their students develop. This intrinsic motivation helps them to stay resilient, even when faced with failures and setbacks. However, their passion is challenged by heavy workloads and demands that stretch their capacity, often juggling multiple roles as a teacher. Wang et al. (2024), highlighted that teaching motivation, the driving force behind every educator's passion and commitment, plays a crucial role in shaping instructional quality and influencing student outcomes.

Theme 4: Difficulties in Teaching Struggling Readers

The participants underscored specific difficulties that English teachers face in encouraging struggling high school readers in reading activities, noting low self-esteem, students' disinterest in reading, slow reading progress, inadequate parental guidance and support, and the lack of teaching materials and resources. A major issue is students' low self-esteem, which often leads to fear of failure, and avoidance behaviors. Laurente (2024) pointed out that many students struggle to stay motivated in reading classes, which greatly affects how well they perform. Another key difficulty is the lack of interest and motivation, despite teachers' encouragement, some students choose to skip reading interventions, showing little enthusiasm or drive to improve. This aligns with the study of Rosano et al. (2025), which reported that students often display shyness, fear, and hesitation when reading, which hinders an engaging and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, teachers not only struggle with students' disengagement in the reading process, but also with inadequate parental guidance and support. This aligns with Casicas & Quirap (2023), which highlighted that a strong foundation at home often contributes to a child's reading success. More than anything, the lack of reading materials and resources creates barriers that go beyond limiting students' learning opportunities. The inadequacy of teaching materials and space constraints students to be exposed to various types of texts, affecting their perspective and independence in reading. Acita et al. (2022) and Sancada (2022) highlighted that teachers face challenges due to the lack of classroom resources and instructional materials specifically designed for remedial reading programs. This shortage hampers their ability to effectively teach and support students, as such resources could enhance both student motivation and instructional effectiveness.

Theme 5: Perceived Successful Experiences of Teachers

The participants highlighted that perceived success in engaging struggling readers stems from significant improvements in students' reading abilities and interests, effectiveness of remedial instruction and reinforcing teachers' roles as transformative

agents. In the study of Francisco (2025), revealed that structured remedial reading programs have a profound impact on enhancing literacy outcomes for non-readers. As students demonstrated comprehension and mastery of foundational reading skills, they also exhibited growth in critical thinking, communication, creativity, and collaboration, gradually evolving into independent learners. These progress, achieved through consistent practice, sustained interest, and supportive interventions brought fulfillment to teachers, who observed students' increased motivation and active participation in reading activities.

Theme 6: Challenging Experiences in Teaching Struggling Readers

The participants shared that while there are rewarding moments in teaching struggling readers, the journey is often marked by deep and persistent challenges that weigh heavily on both students and teachers. A common difficulty is students' unwillingness to engage actively in the reading process. Teachers addressed these barriers by encouraging patience, perseverance, and gradual mastery of reading skills, while emphasizing word familiarity and consistent attendance in reading sessions. Students who are intrinsically motivated to read immerse themselves in texts with enthusiasm, leading to heightened enjoyment, greater dedication, and an enhanced capacity to independently direct their learning journey (Perry et al., 2025). Participants highlighted the critical role of both motivation and inspiration, noting that inspiring students helps sustain long-term interest in reading. Building students' confidence, though gradual, was seen as important in overcoming reading difficulties, proving that motivation and drive are key elements to achieving reading success.

Theme 7: Helpful Teaching Strategies with Struggling Readers

English teachers shared a variety of foundational, engaging, and personalized strategies that have proven most effective in helping struggling readers improve. Phonics and word recognition were widely emphasized as essential starting points, with several teachers using digital tools and videos to develop these core skills. This is in parity with one of the findings in the study of Francisco (2025) that phonics-based instruction and sight word practice are some of the proven techniques for improving reading skills of struggling readers. The strategy of repetition and modeling also stood out among other reading strategies, where English teachers consistently demonstrate fluency and proper pronunciation of words that allows struggling readers to imitate and gradually builds confidence in reading. This aligns with Lengkoan & Hampp's (2022) conclusion that the imitation technique is an effective method for learning English, particularly in enhancing pronunciation and listening comprehension. Another effective strategy mentioned was anchored instruction, making learning more relevant and engaging. Additionally, peer tutoring, a collaborative reading strategy, helps boost students' morale and nourishes students' enthusiasm and motivation in reading. This aligns with the study of Tang et al. (2021), which emphasized that cooperative, collaborative, and peer-tutoring strategies enhanced elementary English learners' reading comprehension, fluency, and phonemic awareness. Similarly, peer tutoring programs helped cultivate good study habits, improved academic performance, and built self-confidence in students (Tan & Evera, 2020). Most importantly, the participants underscored the value of parental support and involvement. When parents are involved in reading interventions, students are more likely to feel supported and motivated both at home and in school - nurturing their positive feelings towards literacy skills enhancement. Idowu & Ogundeko (2024), emphasized that collaboration between parents, school management, and teachers is crucial for improving reading instruction.

Theme 8: Professional Development Opportunities for Teachers

English teachers shared several professional development opportunities that helped them to support struggling high school readers in achieving reading competence. Through various experiences with struggling readers, it helped them to open meaningful avenues for both personal and professional growth. Some of them have engaged in formal

opportunities like school-based training, workshops, and Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, which foster collaboration, knowledge sharing and discussion, and exposure to best practices and approaches in reading instruction. Others took their own initiatives in expanding their knowledge through self-directed learning – browsing online resources, watching educational reading content, and even following reading content creators to gain practical strategies that can help them in supporting their students with reading difficulties. Teachers can develop grit, motivation, and self-directed learning skills through professional development initiatives (Lan, 2022). Through self-directed learning, teachers grew more confident, improved their teaching methods, and became more committed to lifelong learning (Sumeg-ang, 2024). In addition, collaboration and peer mentoring among teachers offer mutual support and the chance to learn from each other's experiences. Teaching struggling readers can also ignite a passion to pursue advanced studies. By enrolling in graduate programs, English teachers gain the opportunity to deepen their theoretical understanding and refine their expertise in implementing effective and tailored reading practices. Portobello (2024), emphasized that post-graduate studies equip educators with a deep understanding of educational theories and teaching methodologies.

Theme 9: Advantages of Professional Development Engagement

The participants emphasized that professional development opportunities helped them to plan crafting reading materials, explore new reading techniques, and even recalibrate their approaches based on the diverse needs of the struggling readers. Through these developmental experiences, teachers gained not just technical skills but also emotional resilience, flexibility, and a deeper understanding of their students. They learned to tailor instruction based on assessments, build trust with learners, and adopt a student-centered approach grounded in empathy. Professional learning activities have a positive impact on teacher professional development, leading to improved teaching practices, increased student engagement, and better student outcomes (Rani et al., 2023).

Theme 10: Practical Recommendations for Teachers Handling Struggling Readers

Drawing from years of hands-on experience, English teachers offered several practical and heartfelt recommendations in handling struggling readers. First, attending seminars, training workshops, and capacity-building sessions will allow teachers to gain fresh perspectives, stay updated on effective strategies, and connect with others facing similar challenges. Relevant and well-resourced professional development in reading can greatly influence teachers' perceptions of their teaching practices, enhance their self-efficacy in teaching reading, and, ultimately, contribute to positive outcomes in their students' reading development (Beach et al., 2020). Second, reflecting empathy as a core teaching value in teaching struggling readers. English teachers emphasized that having passion, dedication, and commitment for teaching are vital, especially when progress feels slow or challenges arise. Their unwavering belief in students' potential and steadfast dedication can serve as a powerful influence, helping students overcome reading difficulties and realize their capabilities. According to Sancada (2022), passionate teachers teach from the heart, and this is vital in a remedial reading program. It's not just about the lessons; it's about really understanding where students are coming from, what they're experiencing, and meeting them where they are. Strengthening connection with students, parents and colleagues is also a key recommendation, building trust and strong relationships among them. The active involvement of everyone becomes a valuable resource, offering additional support to teachers in fostering and enhancing students' reading skills. Lastly, English teachers also advocated for a more engaging reading environment by improving access to reading materials and designing dedicated reading spaces. This resonates with the research of Laurente (2024), which observed that limited access to diverse and age-appropriate reading materials can significantly impede the development of critical literacy skills, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency. Furthermore, Sancada (2022) pointed out that poor classroom facilities further exacerbate

these challenges, creating an environment that is not conducive to fostering students' reading skills.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the lived experiences of English teachers in teaching struggling high school readers revealed a complex combination of challenges, strategies, and professional growth opportunities.

- a. English teachers face significant internal and external barriers, including emotional and motivational struggles among students, as well as a lack of support from home, limited reading resources, and digital distractions. Struggling readers also notably struggle with poor reading comprehension, limited word recognition, weak phonetic understanding, reluctance in learning, feelings of shame and pressure, personal struggles, and lack of motivation and initiative, which all are foundational skills necessary for reading achievement.
- b. Despite experiencing failures and setbacks in the reading progress of their students, teachers employ a variety of strategies, such as phonics instruction, repetition, anchored learning, and peer tutoring, to address reading difficulties and engage struggling readers.
- c. The crucial role of active parental involvement in fostering student motivation and success was also highlighted in reinforcing reading skills at home. Teachers also advocated for a more engaging reading environment by improving access to reading materials and designing dedicated reading spaces for students in achieving reading success.
- d. Teaching struggling readers help teachers to expand and gain professional development opportunities through formal training, self-directed learning, peer mentoring and collaboration. Through these opportunities, teachers were provided new found knowledge, deepened their understanding of effective reading approaches, and widened their perceptions of struggling readers.
- e. Professional development and career advancement opportunities not only develop and recalibrate teachers' reading strategies but also strengthen their ability to build connections and empathize with their students. As a result, it sparks a desire for them to pursue further academic and professional advancement opportunities.
- f. Several practical recommendations also emerged for improving the lived experiences of English teachers in teaching struggling high school readers. These include engaging in capacity building training and seminars, reflecting empathy as a core teaching value, strengthening connection with students, parents, and colleagues, and optimizing and improving reading materials and facilities.
- g. Teachers can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers struggling readers by continuously refining their teaching strategies, engaging in professional growth, and building strong support systems. These efforts can significantly enhance the reading outcomes of struggling high school readers, promoting not only academic success but also fostering a lifelong love of learning and reading.

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