Reading Between the Lines: A Phenomenological Study on The Lived Experiences of Grade 7 Students with Functional Illiteracy in The Context of Academic Literacy Transition

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ABSTRACT

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| **Introduction:** Functional illiteracy refers to the condition in which individuals, despite having basic reading and writing skills, are unable to effectively comprehend, interpret, and apply written texts in real-life or academic contexts  **Aims:** This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Grade 7 students identified as functionally illiterate as they transitioned from elementary to junior high school, focusing on their academic, emotional, and social challenges.  **Study design:** A descriptive phenomenological research design was employed to capture authentic student experiences and insights.  **Place and Duration of Study:** The study was conducted at Holy Child Central Colleges, Inc., South Cotabato, Philippines, during the academic year 2023–2024.  **Methodology:** Ten Grade 7 students who exhibited characteristics of functional illiteracy were purposively selected as respondents. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, which allowed the identification of recurring themes across student narratives.  **Results:** The analysis revealed four major themes: (1) *Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame* – students masked their reading difficulties to avoid ridicule; (2) *The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy* – they experienced frustration, anxiety, and low self-esteem; (3) *Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom* – strategies included memorization, task avoidance, and reliance on peers; and (4) *Longing for Support and Understanding* – students emphasized the importance of empathetic teachers, individualized instruction, and safe learning  **Conclusion:** Functional illiteracy had both academic and socio-emotional impacts on students’ classroom engagement and participation. The study highlighted the importance of learner-responsive interventions that address not only literacy skill gaps but also the emotional needs of learners. Creating safe, inclusive, and supportive educational environments is crucial for helping functionally illiterate students thrive during this critical stage of transition. |

*Keywords: Functional illiteracy; Grade 7 students; lived experiences; academic challenges; emotional struggles; socio-emotional impact; learner-responsive interventions*

1. INTRODUCTION

Functional illiteracy refers to the condition in which individuals, despite having basic reading and writing skills, are unable to effectively comprehend, interpret, and apply written texts in real-life or academic contexts (UNESCO, 2017). Unlike absolute illiteracy, which is the inability to read or write at all, functional illiteracy highlights a deeper challenge: students can decode words but struggle to extract meaning, limiting their capacity to engage meaningfully with learning tasks (Gee, 2015). This distinction is particularly important in education, as comprehension rather than mere recognition of words determines true literacy.

The transition from elementary to junior high school is a critical stage where literacy demands increase significantly. At this point, students are expected not only to read texts but also to analyze, evaluate, and apply information across subjects (Mirasol, 2024). For functionally illiterate learners, these expectations create both academic and emotional barriers, often leading to frustration, low self-esteem, and disengagement in classroom participation.

In educational research, phenomenology provides a meaningful way to explore such issues by giving voice to students’ lived experiences. This approach goes beyond test scores and statistics, instead focusing on how learners themselves perceive, cope with, and make sense of their struggles with literacy. By using this lens, the study emphasizes not only the cognitive aspects of functional illiteracy but also its socio-emotional impacts, ensuring a holistic understanding of the problem.

Teachers continue to foster inclusive learning environments; however, they encounter growing challenges in addressing the issue of functional illiteracy among junior high school students (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). While the problem of illiteracy is often associated with adults, research shows that functional illiteracy is already prevalent among learners as early as their transition from elementary to high school (Reyes, 2021). Lopez (2020) emphasized that many learners are able to decode text but struggle with comprehension, limiting their ability to apply meaning to academic tasks. This concern has become one of the major challenges for teachers, requiring immediate intervention to prevent long-term academic and social consequences.

International studies reveal that functional illiteracy is not limited to the Philippine context. In the United States, many students who complete elementary education still fall short of the expected reading comprehension levels necessary for higher academic learning (Westbrook J. et al, 2023). Similarly, research conducted in South Africa highlighted that more than half of junior high learners experienced difficulties in reading for understanding, which directly affected their classroom participation (Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016). These global patterns emphasize the urgency of addressing functional illiteracy as a foundational barrier to student success.

In the Philippines, this issue is even more alarming. The country consistently ranks low in international assessments of reading literacy, with Filipino learners showing significant challenges in comprehension and application skills (Morrow, 2001). This reality is felt strongly in local schools where teachers witness students’ struggles despite completing basic education. As highlighted by Morrow (2001), functionally illiterate students often hide their difficulties out of shame, leading to anxiety, low self-esteem, and disengagement in school activities. Understanding the lived experiences of these learners is therefore crucial in designing effective and empathetic interventions.

This study holds value for educators, administrators, and policymakers, particularly in improving literacy instruction at the secondary level. By exploring the lived experiences of Grade 7 students in Holy Child Central Colleges, Inc., the study seeks to uncover how functional illiteracy affects their learning, self-esteem, and classroom participation. It also aims to highlight the strategies they use to cope and their expressed need for support and understanding. The findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on literacy development by centering student voices, thereby informing more inclusive and learner-responsive interventions.

Anchored on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy, the study values the authentic narratives of functionally illiterate students as meaningful and valid sources of knowledge. The research was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, which allowed the identification of key themes such as silent struggles, emotional toll, coping mechanisms, and the longing for support. Through this lens, the study emphasizes the importance of listening to students’ experiences in order to create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments that promote both academic and emotional growth.

**Objectives of the Study**

This study specifically seeks to:

* Describe the lived experiences of Grade 7 students identified as functionally illiterate during their transition from elementary to junior high school.
* Explore the academic challenges faced by functionally illiterate learners in coping with the literacy demands of secondary education.
* Examine the emotional and social struggles that accompany functional illiteracy, such as feelings of shame, frustration, and low self-esteem.
* Identify the coping mechanisms and strategies employed by students to navigate classroom tasks despite their reading difficulties.
* Highlight the students’ expressed needs for support and understanding from teachers, peers, and the school community.
* Provide insights that may guide educators, administrators, and policymakers in developing learner-responsive and inclusive interventions that address both the academic and socio-emotional dimensions of functional illiteracy.

2. material and methods

This study was anchored in phenomenological research, which seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences and understand how individuals make sense of their everyday realities. Through this approach, rich and detailed narratives were gathered to reveal the authentic struggles, coping mechanisms, and aspirations of students experiencing functional illiteracy.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Grade 7 students at Holy Child Central Colleges, Inc. who exhibited characteristics of functional illiteracy. The focus was to understand how these students navigated academic demands, their emotional and social challenges, and their personal reflections on receiving or needing support.

**Sample and Sampling Technique:**

The recommended number of participants in phenomenological research typically ranges between five (5) and ten (10) individuals (Creswell, 2016). For this study, ten (10) Grade 7 students were purposively selected using **criteria-based sampling** to ensure that participants possessed the specific characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) completion of elementary education but with persistent difficulties in reading comprehension, (2) willingness and openness to share their lived experiences, and (3) recognition by their teachers as exhibiting signs of functional illiteracy. This purposive criteria sampling method ensured that only students who could provide rich, meaningful, and authentic insights into the experience of functional illiteracy during the transition to junior high school were included in the study.

**Participants**:

The participants were Grade 7 students enrolled in Holy Child Central Colleges, Inc. They were selected to represent learners who, despite completing elementary school, continued to struggle with reading comprehension and functional literacy skills. To ensure reliability, participants were identified in consultation with their Language teachers and advisers, who confirmed their persistent reading and comprehension difficulties. The participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Each student’s account was treated with utmost sensitivity, respecting their dignity and individuality.

**Data Collection Procedure:**

Data were gathered through In-Depth Interviews (IDI) to allow participants to openly share their personal experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms regarding functional illiteracy (Creswell, 2016). The interviews were conducted within July 2025. Prior to data collection, parental consent and participant assent were obtained, considering the age of the participants. Interviews were arranged at times and venues convenient for the students, either within the school or through virtual platforms if necessary. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was prepared to ensure that the conversation flowed naturally while covering the core aspects of the study. Interviews were recorded with permission and supplemented by field notes. After each session, recordings and notes were reviewed and cross-checked to ensure accuracy of data.

**Data Analysis:**

The data collected were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic framework for inductive thematic analysis. This six-phase process included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This framework allowed the researchers to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes that reflected the lived experiences of functionally illiterate students, thereby capturing both the academic and socio-emotional dimensions of the phenomenon.

**Ethical Considerations:**

Given the sensitivity of the research and the involvement of minors, ethical considerations were a top priority. Informed consent from parents/guardians and assent from students were secured prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed by assigning pseudonyms to all participants. The students were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any stage without any consequence. Care was taken to ensure that the interview environment was supportive and non-judgmental, minimizing the risk of discomfort or embarrassment.

3. results and discussion

**3.1 Modified Paradigm**

Table 1 presents the major themes that emerged as results of the conducted study. The major themes are **Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame, The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy, Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom, and Longing for Support and Understanding.**

**Major Theme 1: Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame**  
Under the first major theme there were two sub-themes: *Masking Reading Difficulties* and *Fear of Judgment*. Stated below are the participants’ statements in relation with the themes:

**Masking Reading Difficulties**

* “I pretend that I can read during class so that my classmates won’t laugh at me.” – Participant 3
* “Sometimes I just keep quiet, even if I don’t understand, because I don’t want anyone to know.” – Participant 7

**Fear of Judgment**

* “I feel ashamed whenever I am asked to read in front of the class, so I avoid it.” – Participant 2
* “I don’t tell my teacher I’m struggling because I’m scared they’ll think I’m dumb.” – Participant 5

**Major Theme 2: The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy**  
Presented below are the sub-themes (*Low Self-Esteem* and *Feelings of Anxiety and Isolation*) and statements related with the second major theme.

**Low Self-Esteem**

* “I sometimes feel useless because I cannot read like my classmates.” – Participant 4
* “I feel like I am always behind, and it makes me sad.” – Participant 8

**Feelings of Anxiety and Isolation**

* “When the teacher asks me to read, my heart beats fast because I’m nervous.” – Participant 1
* “I stay away from group activities because I don’t want them to notice my problem.” – Participant 6

**Major Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom**  
Under the third major theme are the sub-themes: *Peer Dependence* and *Temporary Strategies*. Stated below are the statements in relation with the mentioned themes.

**Peer Dependence**

* “I just copy the answers of my seatmate when I don’t understand.” – Participant 9
* “I ask my classmate to explain to me what the text says.” – Participant 2

**Temporary Strategies**

* “I memorize the passage instead of reading it.” – Participant 5
* “Sometimes, I just guess the answers during reading activities.” – Participant 7

**Major Theme 4: Longing for Support and Understanding**  
The fourth major theme has two sub-themes which are *Need for Teacher Guidance* and *Family and Peer Support*. Below are the statements that support the major themes along with their sub-themes.

**Need for Teacher Guidance**

* “I wish the teacher would give me more time to learn.” – Participant 1
* “If only teachers understood that I need simpler words, maybe I could learn better.” – Participant 6

**Family and Peer Support**

* “I feel happy when my parents help me read at home.” – Participant 4
* “It helps me when my classmates are patient with me.” – Participant 8

**Reflecting on the role of the researcher**, several aspects were considered. First is the importance of listening empathetically, creating a safe space for participants to share their authentic experiences. While conducting thematic analysis, we emphasized both the similarities and uniqueness of the students’ struggles. Moreover, qualitative research is interpretative in nature, requiring us to make meaning from the narratives, establish connections across responses, and present them as coherent themes (Creswell, 2016).

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| Table 1. Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes | |
| Major Themes | Sub-Themes |
| Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame | Masking Reading Difficulties  Fear of Judgement |
| The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy | Low Self-Esteem  Feelings of Anxiety and Isolation |
| Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom | Peer Dependence  Temporary Strategies |
| Longing for Support and Understanding | Need for Teacher Guidance Family and Peer Support |

This phenomenological study revealed the lived experiences of Grade 7 students who were identified as functionally illiterate as they transitioned to junior high school. The analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic framework, brought forward four key themes: **Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame, The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy, Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom, and Longing for Support and Understanding.**

The first theme, **Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame**, reflected how students quietly endured their inability to read fluently, often concealing their difficulties to avoid embarrassment. This finding aligned with Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), who emphasized that poor readers often masked their struggles to escape ridicule, which further limited their participation in class. Similarly, Morrow, L.M (2001) highlighted that functional illiteracy carried stigma that made learners reluctant to seek help.

The second theme, **The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy**, showed that functional illiteracy negatively affected students’ self-esteem and emotional well-being. Many participants described feelings of frustration, isolation, and inadequacy. These findings were consistent with Westbrook et al. (2023), who found that persistent reading difficulties often resulted in emotional distress and disengagement from school. Likewise, Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), noted that struggling readers frequently experienced heightened anxiety, which influenced both their academic performance and social relationships.

The third theme, **Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom**, revealed how learners developed strategies to manage their struggles, such as relying on peers, memorizing passages, or pretending to read. This was consistent with the findings of Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), who observed that struggling readers often depended on social interactions to navigate classroom tasks. Similarly, Morrow. L.M. (2001), reported that students frequently turned to adaptive but temporary strategies, such as rote memorization, to keep up with literacy demands.

The fourth theme, **Longing for Support and Understanding**, captured students’ expressed need for teachers, parents, and peers to recognize their challenges and provide meaningful assistance. This theme was echoed in the work of Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016), who argued that supportive teacher-student relationships significantly improved reading engagement. Likewise, Morrow. L.M. (2001), stressed that emotional and instructional support played a critical role in sustaining struggling readers’ motivation and perseverance.

The findings showed that students often carried an internalized sense of inadequacy, which led them to hide their struggles and avoid participation in classroom activities (Gee, 2015). It is elaborated by Gee (2015) that the emotional toll was evident through feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, and fear of being ridiculed, which hindered their academic and social engagement.

Despite these difficulties, the students employed various coping mechanisms such as relying on peers, memorization, and passive compliance (Morrow, 2001). However, these strategies often failed to address their fundamental literacy gaps. The recurring theme of longing for support and understanding highlighted the critical role of teachers, peers, and family in fostering a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment.

The study focused on the importance of understanding the individual needs of students with functional illiteracy and how teachers adapted their strategies to provide support. Future directions for potential research could expand on these findings by developing more comprehensive theoretical frameworks for differentiated instruction and assessment in reading across diverse educational settings.

The findings further suggested that teacher training programs should include strategies for identifying individual learning difficulties and implementing differentiated interventions, especially in reading, as it is a foundational skill. Future policies and actions could focus on integrating such training into teacher education curricula to better prepare teachers in addressing functional illiteracy and supporting students’ transition into higher levels of schooling.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed that Grade 7 students identified as functionally illiterate experienced significant academic and emotional challenges during their transition to junior high school. The findings highlighted four major themes: Silent Struggles and Hidden Shame, The Emotional Toll of Illiteracy, Coping Mechanisms in the Classroom, and Longing for Support and Understanding. Students often concealed their difficulties due to fear of judgment, which negatively affected their self-esteem, participation, and overall well-being. While they developed coping strategies such as memorization and reliance on peers, these did not resolve their literacy gaps. The study further emphasized the critical role of supportive teachers, peers, and families in addressing both academic and socio-emotional needs. These results underscored the importance of differentiated instruction, early identification of reading difficulties, and teacher training programs designed to support functionally illiterate learners.

Ethical approval and consent:

This study adhered to established ethical standards in educational research as outlined by Creswell (2016), ensuring the protection of participants' rights, confidentiality, and well-being. Approval for the conduct of this research was sought from the Basic Education Department of Holy Child Central Colleges Inc.

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and their guardians, given that the participants were elementary learners. The consent process included an explanation of the study’s purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, and assurance that participation was voluntary. Respondents were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly observed. The names of the participants, their parents, and their school were coded to prevent disclosure of identity. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes. The researchers ensured that no psychological or emotional harm was inflicted during the conduct of the interviews and focus group discussions.

Through compliance with these ethical considerations, the study upheld integrity, respect, and responsibility in line with the ethical principles of conducting research in the field of education.

**Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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