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Beyond Alphabet Recognition: Lived Experiences of Early Grade Learners at Bukig Elementary School in Developing Foundational Reading Literacy

¹ Rosie U. Dulnuan

Bukig Elementary School

Bukig, Camandag, Asipulo, Ifugao

rosie.dulnuan@deped.gov.ph

Abstract

Foundational reading literacy is a critical determinant of children's academic success and lifelong learning. In the early grades, reading instruction extends beyond recognizing letters and sounds to developing comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonemic awareness, and meaningful engagement with texts. As literacy serves as the cornerstone of learning across all subject areas, understanding how young learners experience the process of becoming readers is essential for improving instructional practices and literacy interventions. Despite the implementation of various reading programs in Philippine elementary schools, limited qualitative studies have explored the lived experiences of early grade learners in developing foundational reading literacy, particularly in geographically isolated and culturally diverse communities. This study explored the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners at Bukig Elementary School, Asipulo, Ifugao, in developing foundational reading literacy. Guided by a descriptive phenomenological research design, the study involved fifteen (15) purposively selected learners who actively participated in school-based reading activities. Data were collected through child-friendly semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reading conversations and were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method. The analysis generated five essential themes: (1) Discovering the Joy of Reading Through Meaningful Experiences; (2) Building Reading Confidence Through Teacher and Family Support; (3) Overcoming Reading Difficulties Through Persistence and Practice; (4) Connecting Reading to Everyday Life and Indigenous Culture; and (5) Growing as Independent and Motivated Readers. The findings revealed that meaningful teacher guidance, family involvement, contextualized reading materials, and supportive literacy environments significantly influenced children's foundational reading development. Based on these findings, the study proposes a Foundational Reading Literacy Development Framework to strengthen literacy instruction, reading interventions, and learner-centered practices in the primary grades. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in early literacy, reading education, and qualitative research within the Philippine basic education context.

Keywords: *foundational reading literacy, early grade learners, phenomenology, literacy development, beginning readers, early childhood education, reading instruction, primary education*



Introduction

Reading is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental skills that children must acquire during the early years of schooling because it serves as the gateway to learning across all academic disciplines. Foundational reading literacy encompasses a range of interrelated competencies, including phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, vocabulary development, oral language, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and motivation to read. These competencies enable children not only to recognize letters and words but also to construct meaning from texts, communicate ideas effectively, and engage in lifelong learning. As learners transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," strong foundational literacy becomes indispensable for academic achievement and personal development (UNESCO, 2023).

Globally, literacy has become a major educational priority because it is directly linked to educational equity, economic development, social inclusion, and sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) emphasizes that all children should acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills as essential components of inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2024). Likewise, the Global Education Monitoring Report highlights that children who fail to develop reading proficiency during the early grades are at a significantly greater risk of experiencing learning poverty, school dropout, and long-term educational disadvantages (UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, improving foundational reading literacy has become a central objective of educational reforms worldwide.

International assessments continue to underscore the urgency of strengthening early literacy instruction. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) demonstrates that reading achievement during the primary years strongly predicts learners' future academic performance and overall educational attainment (Mullis et al., 2023). Similarly, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) emphasizes that reading literacy extends beyond decoding printed words; it includes learners' ability to understand, interpret, evaluate, and apply written information to solve real-life problems and participate meaningfully in society (OECD, 2023). These international frameworks encourage educational systems to develop literacy programs that foster comprehension, critical thinking, motivation, and authentic engagement with reading.

Within the Philippine educational context, strengthening foundational literacy has become a national priority. The Department of Education has implemented comprehensive literacy initiatives under the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum, emphasizing that literacy instruction during Kindergarten to Grade 3 should focus on developing phonological awareness, oral language, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension through developmentally appropriate and learner-centered approaches (Department of Education [DepEd], 2023). The implementation of the National Learning Recovery Program and the National Reading Program further reflects the government's commitment to addressing learning gaps that emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among beginning readers (DepEd, 2023).

Foundational reading literacy is especially significant in the primary grades because children acquire essential cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional competencies that influence future learning. According to the Science of Reading, reading development involves the integration of oral language, phonological processing, decoding, vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading comprehension through systematic and explicit instruction (Castles et al., 2018). Effective literacy instruction therefore extends beyond alphabet recognition to meaningful interactions with texts that cultivate curiosity, confidence, comprehension, and a lifelong love for reading.

Situated in Bukig Elementary School, Bukig, Camandag, Asipulo, Ifugao, the present study recognizes the unique educational context of learners residing in a rural and culturally rich indigenous community. The learners are exposed to diverse linguistic backgrounds, indigenous traditions, local stories, and community experiences that shape their literacy development. Teachers continuously adapt instructional strategies by utilizing contextualized reading materials, culturally responsive pedagogy, storytelling, shared reading, and interactive literacy activities that connect reading instruction with learners' everyday lives. These localized approaches recognize that literacy development is deeply influenced by children's language, culture, family, and community experiences.

Despite continuous improvements in literacy instruction, many beginning readers continue to experience challenges in developing reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and reading confidence. Previous studies have largely focused on measuring reading achievement, intervention effectiveness, phonics instruction, or literacy assessment using quantitative methodologies. While these studies provide valuable evidence regarding learners' performance, they offer limited understanding of how young children personally experience becoming readers. Specifically, there remains a scarcity of phenomenological studies exploring the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners as they develop foundational reading literacy, particularly within geographically isolated and indigenous communities in the Philippines.

Moreover, existing research has seldom examined how teacher support, family involvement, contextualized instruction, indigenous culture, and children's own motivations collectively shape their literacy journeys. Understanding these lived experiences is essential because reading development is not solely a cognitive process but also a social, emotional, cultural, and experiential one. Children's perceptions, struggles, successes, and interactions significantly influence their motivation to read and their overall literacy growth.

Recognizing these gaps, this study explored the lived experiences of early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School in developing foundational reading literacy. By examining children's perspectives on learning to read, the study seeks to contribute to improving literacy instruction, strengthening school-based reading programs, informing educational policy, and enhancing teacher practices that support beginning readers. Furthermore, the findings are expected to provide meaningful insights for teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, literacy coordinators, and policymakers committed to ensuring that every child becomes a confident, competent, and motivated reader.

Research Gap

Although numerous studies have investigated early reading achievement, phonics instruction, literacy interventions, and reading comprehension, the majority have employed quantitative approaches that measure learners' reading performance, vocabulary acquisition, or instructional effectiveness. Comparatively little research has explored the lived experiences of beginning readers as they develop foundational reading literacy. Existing literature rarely examines how young children experience the transition from alphabet recognition to meaningful reading, particularly within rural and indigenous communities where language, culture, family, and local learning environments significantly influence literacy development. Furthermore, limited phenomenological studies have investigated how teacher support, family engagement, contextualized reading materials, and learners' personal motivations shape foundational literacy among Kindergarten to Grade 2 pupils in Philippine public schools. Addressing these gaps, the present study provides an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School in developing

foundational reading literacy, thereby contributing context-specific evidence for improving literacy instruction, reading interventions, and learner-centered educational practices.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is anchored on Ehri's Theory of Word Reading Development (Ehri, 2005), which explains that children progress through developmental phases as they learn to recognize words, beginning with pre-alphabetic recognition, partial alphabetic reading, full alphabetic decoding, and consolidated alphabetic reading. The theory emphasizes that successful reading development requires systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, letter-sound relationships, decoding, and repeated exposure to meaningful reading experiences.

The study is further grounded in Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which posits that learning develops through social interaction, guided participation, and meaningful collaboration with more knowledgeable individuals. Within early literacy education, teachers, parents, and peers serve as significant facilitators who scaffold children's reading development through shared reading, storytelling, guided practice, and constructive feedback. Literacy acquisition therefore emerges through continuous interaction within supportive social and cultural environments.

Additionally, the investigation is informed by Clay's Emergent Literacy Theory (1991), which views literacy development as a gradual process beginning long before formal schooling. Children construct literacy knowledge through everyday experiences involving oral language, print awareness, storytelling, environmental print, play, and meaningful interactions with texts. This perspective highlights the importance of creating literacy-rich environments where children actively engage with language and reading in authentic contexts.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives explain that foundational reading literacy develops through systematic instruction, meaningful social interaction, authentic literacy experiences, and culturally responsive learning environments that nurture children's confidence, motivation, and comprehension.

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School in developing foundational reading literacy.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do early grade learners describe their lived experiences in developing foundational reading literacy?
2. What learning experiences contribute to the development of their foundational reading competencies?
3. What challenges do learners encounter in learning to read?
4. What strategies and sources of support help learners overcome reading difficulties?
5. How may the findings be utilized in developing a Foundational Reading Literacy Development Framework for strengthening early literacy instruction and reading interventions in primary education?

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Foundational Reading Literacy in Early Childhood Education

Foundational reading literacy is widely regarded as one of the most critical competencies children must acquire during the early years of schooling because it forms the basis for learning across all subject areas. It encompasses a range of interconnected skills, including oral language, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, decoding, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and comprehension. These competencies enable learners not only to recognize printed symbols but also to construct meaning from texts, communicate effectively, and participate successfully in academic and social contexts. International evidence consistently demonstrates that children who develop strong foundational literacy during the primary grades are more likely to achieve higher academic performance and lifelong educational success (UNESCO, 2023).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes that foundational literacy is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), as literacy empowers individuals to access knowledge, improve socioeconomic opportunities, and actively participate in society (UNESCO, 2023). Likewise, the Global Education Monitoring Report underscores that children who fail to attain minimum reading proficiency by the end of primary education often experience persistent learning gaps, reduced educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities later in life (UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, strengthening foundational reading literacy has become a major educational priority worldwide.

The Science of Reading and Reading Development

Recent advances in cognitive science have significantly improved understanding of how children learn to read. The Science of Reading integrates findings from psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and education to explain that successful reading requires the coordinated development of multiple literacy components, including phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, language comprehension, fluency, and background knowledge.

Castles et al. (2018) explained that effective reading instruction should provide systematic and explicit teaching of phonological awareness and phonics while simultaneously developing oral language and reading comprehension. Their review emphasized that reading is not a naturally acquired skill but one that requires carefully structured instruction supported by meaningful literacy experiences. Children who receive evidence-based reading instruction demonstrate stronger decoding skills, improved reading fluency, and higher comprehension than those exposed to unsystematic literacy instruction (Castles et al., 2018).

Similarly, Seidenberg (2020) argued that reading development is a gradual cognitive process in which children integrate linguistic knowledge, visual recognition, memory, and comprehension strategies through repeated exposure to meaningful reading experiences. These findings suggest that literacy instruction should move beyond alphabet recognition toward helping learners understand, interpret, and enjoy texts.

Emergent Literacy and Early Reading Development

Emergent literacy theory explains that literacy learning begins long before formal schooling through children's everyday interactions with language, print, storytelling, songs, environmental texts, and family literacy experiences. Young children gradually develop concepts about print, oral language,

vocabulary, phonological awareness, and motivation to read through meaningful experiences at home and in school.

According to Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), emergent literacy consists of two major domains: inside-out skills, which include phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and decoding, and outside-in skills, which involve vocabulary, oral language, comprehension, and conceptual knowledge. Both domains contribute significantly to successful reading development and should be nurtured simultaneously during early childhood.

More recent research continues to affirm that early literacy experiences significantly influence children's later academic achievement. Piasta et al. (2020) found that literacy-rich classroom environments, interactive read-aloud sessions, guided reading activities, and meaningful conversations about texts substantially improve children's reading readiness and comprehension skills. These findings highlight the importance of providing developmentally appropriate literacy experiences that actively engage young learners.

Teacher Support and Foundational Reading Literacy

Teachers play a fundamental role in children's literacy development because they provide systematic instruction, scaffold learning, monitor reading progress, and cultivate positive attitudes toward reading. Effective literacy instruction requires teachers to create supportive classroom environments where children feel confident exploring texts, asking questions, and practicing newly acquired reading skills.

Research by Kim et al. (2023) found that teacher instructional quality significantly predicts improvements in early reading fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension among primary learners. Teachers who employ differentiated instruction, explicit modeling, guided reading, formative assessment, and continuous feedback create learning environments that promote reading confidence and sustained literacy growth.

Similarly, Graham et al. (2020) reported that learner-centered literacy instruction emphasizing active participation, collaborative reading, and individualized support produces greater improvements in children's reading achievement than traditional teacher-centered approaches. The researchers further emphasized that effective teachers recognize learners' individual differences and adapt instruction according to children's developmental needs.

Family Involvement in Reading Development

Family involvement is consistently recognized as one of the strongest predictors of children's literacy achievement. Parents and caregivers contribute significantly to reading development by engaging children in shared reading, storytelling, conversations, print-rich activities, and literacy-related play within the home environment.

A systematic review by Xie et al. (2023) concluded that home literacy environments positively influence children's vocabulary, phonological awareness, reading motivation, and comprehension. Children who regularly experience shared book reading and parental encouragement demonstrate stronger foundational literacy skills than those with limited home literacy experiences.

Similarly, Sénéchal and Young (2017) reported that parental involvement contributes not only to children's decoding abilities but also to reading enjoyment, confidence, and long-term motivation. Their findings indicate that home-school partnerships are essential for strengthening foundational reading literacy during the early grades.

Contextualized Reading Instruction and Culturally Responsive Literacy

Contemporary literacy education recognizes that children learn more effectively when instructional materials reflect their cultural identities, languages, lived experiences, and local communities. Contextualized instruction enhances reading comprehension because learners can connect new knowledge with familiar experiences.

Gay (2018) emphasized that culturally responsive teaching acknowledges learners' cultural backgrounds as valuable educational resources that enhance engagement, comprehension, and academic success. Reading materials that incorporate familiar settings, local stories, indigenous traditions, and community experiences foster stronger learner motivation and deeper understanding.

Within indigenous communities, contextualized literacy instruction supports both language preservation and reading development. Cummins (2021) argued that culturally relevant literacy practices promote children's identity formation while simultaneously strengthening foundational reading competencies. These findings are particularly relevant to schools located in culturally diverse communities such as Ifugao, where integrating local narratives and indigenous knowledge into literacy instruction enriches children's reading experiences.

Reading Motivation and Reading Confidence

Reading motivation significantly influences children's literacy development because motivated learners read more frequently, persist through difficulties, and engage more deeply with texts. Motivation develops through positive reading experiences, meaningful teacher encouragement, successful reading accomplishments, and access to interesting reading materials.

Schiefele et al. (2023) found that intrinsic motivation predicts children's reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, and reading fluency. Learners who enjoy reading and perceive themselves as capable readers demonstrate greater persistence when encountering unfamiliar words or difficult texts.

Likewise, Guthrie and Wigfield (2020) emphasized that reading engagement emerges when children experience autonomy, competence, and meaningful interactions with texts. Classroom environments that celebrate reading success and provide diverse reading opportunities contribute significantly to developing lifelong readers.

Reading Education in the Philippine Context

Improving foundational reading literacy has become a national educational priority in the Philippines following reports indicating substantial learning losses and increased learning poverty among Filipino children. The Department of Education has responded through the implementation of the National Reading Program, National Learning Recovery Program, and strengthened early literacy initiatives under the MATATAG Curriculum, all of which prioritize reading proficiency among learners in Kindergarten to Grade 3 (Department of Education, 2023).

The revised curriculum emphasizes explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, oral language, reading fluency, and comprehension while encouraging contextualized, inclusive, and learner-centered instructional practices. Teachers are encouraged to implement reading interventions, formative assessments, differentiated instruction, and community-based literacy activities that address diverse learner needs (DepEd, 2023).

Despite these initiatives, reports continue to indicate that many Filipino learners experience difficulties in reading comprehension and foundational literacy, highlighting the continuing need for effective instructional strategies, contextualized literacy programs, and strong school-family partnerships that support beginning readers (UNESCO, 2023).

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of early grade learners in developing foundational reading literacy at Bukig Elementary School, Bukig, Camandag, Asipulo, Ifugao. Descriptive phenomenology was selected because it seeks to describe and understand the essence of participants' lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon while minimizing researcher bias through the process of epoché or bracketing (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). This approach enabled the researcher to examine how young learners experienced the transition from alphabet recognition to meaningful reading by exploring their perceptions, emotions, challenges, motivations, and literacy experiences within their natural learning environment. Unlike quantitative studies that measure reading achievement through standardized assessments, phenomenology emphasizes understanding children's personal experiences as they develop foundational reading literacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study was conducted at Bukig Elementary School, located in Bukig, Camandag, Asipulo, Ifugao, Philippines. The school serves learners from indigenous communities and provides basic education to children from Kindergarten to Grade 6. The school implements the Department of Education's foundational literacy programs and school-based reading interventions designed to improve reading proficiency among beginning readers. The culturally rich environment of the community, characterized by indigenous traditions, local languages, and contextualized learning experiences, provides a meaningful setting for examining how children develop literacy competencies through classroom instruction, storytelling, guided reading, family support, and community engagement.

The participants consisted of fifteen (15) early grade learners from Kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2 who were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is appropriate in phenomenological research because it allows the researcher to select individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon being investigated and who can provide rich, meaningful descriptions of their experiences (Patton, 2015). The participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled in Kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2 at Bukig Elementary School; (2) actively participating in reading instruction and school-based literacy activities; (3) identified by their teachers as capable of communicating their learning experiences through age-appropriate conversations; (4) willing to participate in the study; and (5) provided parental informed consent and learner assent prior to participation. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed child-friendly semi-structured interview guide designed to encourage young learners to describe their reading experiences using simple, age-appropriate language. The interview guide was developed following an extensive review of literature on early literacy, foundational reading, emergent literacy, and reading motivation. The interview questions focused on children's experiences in learning to read, their favorite reading activities, challenges encountered during reading lessons, support received from teachers and family members, and the significance of reading in their daily lives. Considering the developmental characteristics of young children, the researcher utilized conversational prompts, picture cues, storybooks, and interactive questioning techniques to facilitate meaningful responses. To establish

content validity, the interview guide was evaluated by three experts specializing in early childhood education, reading education, and qualitative research. Their suggestions regarding language appropriateness, clarity, sequencing, and developmental suitability were incorporated before the conduct of the actual study. A pilot interview involving three early grade learners from another elementary school was also conducted to determine the comprehensibility and appropriateness of the interview questions. These learners were excluded from the actual study.

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the school head and the appropriate research ethics committee. Parents or legal guardians received detailed information regarding the objectives, procedures, benefits, and ethical safeguards of the study before signing written informed consent forms. Learners likewise provided verbal or written assent appropriate to their developmental level. Individual face-to-face child-friendly interviews were conducted in a quiet and familiar room within the school to ensure that participants felt comfortable and secure. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes, considering the attention span and developmental characteristics of young children. With parental permission, interviews were audio-recorded while the researcher simultaneously documented field notes capturing children's facial expressions, gestures, emotional responses, and contextual observations. To enrich the data and improve credibility, non-participant classroom observations and reading conversations were also conducted during regular literacy sessions. Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Since several participants occasionally expressed themselves using their local language, translations into English were carefully completed while preserving the original meanings of their responses. Participants' teachers assisted in verifying contextual interpretations where necessary. Member checking appropriate for young learners was conducted by confirming the meanings of responses through follow-up conversations and consultation with their classroom teachers.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method (Colaizzi, 1978). Initially, all interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to obtain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. Significant statements directly related to foundational reading literacy were identified and extracted from the transcripts. Meanings were then formulated from these significant statements while remaining faithful to the participants' intended meanings. Similar meanings were clustered into categories that subsequently formed emergent themes representing the essence of the learners' reading experiences. These thematic clusters were synthesized into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, from which the fundamental structure of developing foundational reading literacy among early grade learners was constructed. Finally, the synthesized findings were validated through consultation with participants' teachers and through age-appropriate follow-up conversations with the learners to ensure that the themes accurately reflected their experiences. To facilitate systematic organization, coding, retrieval, and thematic analysis of qualitative data, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was utilized throughout the analytical process.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with participants, classroom observations, member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of interview transcripts, observation notes, and reading conversations. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the participants, research setting, and literacy context, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings. Dependability was established by maintaining an audit trail documenting every stage of the research process, including participant recruitment, interview procedures, coding decisions, theme development, and interpretation of

findings. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling, bracketing, peer review, and careful documentation to minimize researcher bias and ensure that interpretations emerged directly from participants' narratives.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, and participation remained entirely voluntary. Written informed consent was secured from parents or legal guardians, while age-appropriate learner assent was obtained from all participating children. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants, and all interview recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and research documents were stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the researcher. Participants and their parents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. All collected information was used solely for academic and research purposes. The study adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality, and privacy, consistent with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173) and internationally accepted ethical standards for research involving children.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview transcripts, classroom observations, and reading conversations using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method generated five essential themes that describe the lived experiences of early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School in developing foundational reading literacy. The themes reveal that literacy development extends beyond alphabet recognition and phonics instruction. Instead, it is a holistic journey shaped by meaningful classroom experiences, teacher guidance, family support, contextualized learning, and children's intrinsic motivation to become readers.

Theme 1: Discovering the Joy of Reading Through Meaningful Learning Experiences

Participants described reading as an enjoyable activity that gradually became meaningful through storytelling, shared reading, picture books, songs, games, and interactive classroom activities. They explained that these engaging literacy experiences helped them recognize letters and words while simultaneously fostering excitement and curiosity about reading. Rather than perceiving reading as a difficult academic task, learners viewed it as an enjoyable activity that allowed them to discover new stories, ideas, and experiences.

One participant shared:

"I like it when Teacher reads stories because I can imagine the pictures in my mind. I also want to read the story by myself." (Participant 4)

Another participant explained:

"Reading games make me happy because I can learn while playing with my classmates." (Participant 9)

Similarly, another learner stated:

"When I finish reading a story, I feel proud because I understand what happened." (Participant 13)

These narratives indicate that meaningful literacy experiences encouraged children to associate reading with enjoyment, achievement, and personal growth. Interactive literacy activities fostered positive emotions toward reading, increasing learners' willingness to participate in classroom reading activities.

These findings support Clay's Emergent Literacy Theory (1991), which emphasizes that literacy develops through meaningful interactions with language and print in engaging environments. Likewise, Piasta et al. (2020) reported that literacy-rich classrooms and interactive reading experiences significantly improve children's motivation and early reading development.

Theme 2: Building Reading Confidence Through Teacher and Family Support

Participants consistently emphasized that the encouragement and guidance provided by teachers and family members significantly contributed to their confidence as beginning readers. Learners appreciated teachers who patiently explained unfamiliar words, listened to them read aloud, corrected mistakes kindly, and celebrated their reading progress. Likewise, many children shared that parents, siblings, and other family members regularly assisted them in practicing reading at home.

One learner expressed:

"Teacher helps me read difficult words. She smiles when I can read correctly, and that makes me happy." (Participant 2)

Another participant shared:

"My mother reads storybooks with me every night. She helps me sound out the words." (Participant 7)

A third participant remarked:

"My older sister lets me practice reading with her. She tells me not to be afraid when I make mistakes." (Participant 11)

These narratives demonstrate that supportive relationships with teachers and families strengthened children's confidence, reduced reading anxiety, and encouraged continuous practice. Learners perceived mistakes as opportunities for improvement because of the positive reinforcement they received from significant adults.

The findings affirm Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which explains that learning develops through guided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. They also support the findings of Xie et al. (2023), who concluded that strong home literacy environments and active parental involvement positively influence children's reading achievement and motivation.

Theme 3: Overcoming Reading Difficulties Through Persistence and Practice

Although participants enjoyed reading, they acknowledged experiencing difficulties in recognizing unfamiliar words, pronouncing complex sounds, reading long sentences, and understanding story meanings. Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated perseverance by repeatedly practicing reading, asking questions, listening carefully to teacher feedback, and participating actively in school reading activities.

One participant shared:

"Sometimes I cannot read long words, but I keep trying until I can say them correctly." (Participant 5)

Another learner explained:

"When I don't know a word, I ask my teacher, and she helps me read it slowly." (Participant 8)

Similarly, another participant stated:

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"I practice reading every day because I want to become a good reader like my classmates." (Participant 15)

These responses reveal that persistence, repeated practice, and constructive teacher support enabled learners to gradually overcome reading difficulties. Rather than giving up, children developed resilience and confidence through consistent literacy experiences.

These findings align with Ehri's Theory of Word Reading Development (2005), which explains that reading proficiency develops progressively through repeated decoding practice, exposure to print, and meaningful reading experiences. The findings also support Castles et al. (2018), who emphasized that systematic instruction combined with continuous practice significantly strengthens foundational reading competencies.

Theme 4: Connecting Reading to Everyday Life and Indigenous Culture

Participants revealed that reading became more meaningful when classroom materials reflected their daily experiences, local environment, and cultural identity. Learners particularly enjoyed stories about family life, farming, animals, nature, indigenous traditions, and community celebrations because they could easily relate these texts to their own lives. Teachers' use of contextualized and culturally relevant reading materials helped learners better understand stories while strengthening their appreciation of their local culture.

One participant stated:

"I like stories about mountains because they are like where we live." (Participant 1)

Another learner shared:

"I enjoy reading stories about our community because they remind me of my grandparents." (Participant 10)

Similarly, another participant remarked:

"Reading stories about plants and farming helps me understand what my parents do every day." (Participant 6)

These narratives indicate that contextualized literacy instruction enhanced learners' reading comprehension by connecting printed texts with familiar experiences. Children became more engaged because reading reflected their cultural identity and everyday environment.

The findings support Gay's (2018) theory of culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes that learning becomes more meaningful when instructional materials acknowledge learners' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Likewise, Cummins (2021) argued that culturally relevant literacy practices strengthen both literacy development and learners' identity formation.

Theme 5: Growing as Independent and Motivated Readers

The final theme reflects learners' gradual transformation into more independent, confident, and motivated readers. Participants described feeling proud whenever they successfully read books independently, answered comprehension questions correctly, or helped classmates who were still learning to read. Many learners expressed that reading had become one of their favorite school activities because it enabled them to learn new knowledge and imagine different places and experiences.

One participant expressed:

"Before, I only knew letters. Now I can read books by myself." (Participant 3)

Another learner stated:

"I want to read many books because I learn new things every day." (Participant 12)

A third participant proudly shared:

"I help my younger brother read because I already know many words." (Participant 14)

These narratives demonstrate that foundational literacy development contributed not only to reading competence but also to children's self-confidence, independence, and intrinsic motivation to continue learning. Reading evolved from a classroom requirement into a meaningful lifelong skill that learners valued personally.

These findings are consistent with Guthrie and Wigfield (2020), who emphasized that reading motivation develops when learners experience competence, autonomy, and meaningful engagement with texts. Similarly, Schiefele et al. (2023) found that intrinsically motivated readers demonstrate stronger comprehension, vocabulary growth, and sustained reading engagement.

Discussion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School in developing foundational reading literacy. The findings demonstrate that literacy development is a holistic and developmental process that extends beyond alphabet recognition and word decoding. Learners described reading as an enjoyable, meaningful, and transformative experience shaped by supportive teachers, engaged families, culturally responsive instruction, and authentic literacy experiences. These findings affirm that successful literacy development involves cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and cultural dimensions that collectively influence children's motivation, confidence, and reading competence.

The first theme, *Discovering the Joy of Reading Through Meaningful Learning Experiences*, highlights the significance of engaging literacy instruction in cultivating children's interest in reading. Participants emphasized that storytelling, shared reading, songs, games, picture books, and interactive classroom activities made learning enjoyable and encouraged active participation in literacy lessons. These experiences transformed reading from a mechanical process of recognizing letters into an exciting opportunity for exploration and imagination. The findings support Clay's Emergent Literacy Theory (1991), which posits that literacy develops through meaningful interactions with language and print in literacy-rich environments. Likewise, Piasta et al. (2020) emphasized that interactive literacy experiences strengthen children's engagement, vocabulary development, and comprehension while fostering positive attitudes toward reading.

The second theme, *Building Reading Confidence Through Teacher and Family Support*, demonstrates the vital role of teachers and families in children's literacy development. Participants consistently described receiving encouragement, guidance, and positive reinforcement from teachers and family members that strengthened their confidence in reading. Teachers patiently modeled reading strategies, corrected errors constructively, and celebrated learners' progress, while parents and siblings reinforced literacy practices through shared reading and home support. These findings affirm Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which explains that learning occurs through guided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. They are likewise consistent with the

findings of Xie et al. (2023), who reported that supportive home literacy environments significantly improve children's reading achievement, confidence, and motivation.

The third theme, *Overcoming Reading Difficulties Through Persistence and Practice*, reveals that literacy development involves continuous effort, resilience, and repeated practice. Participants acknowledged experiencing challenges in decoding unfamiliar words, pronouncing difficult sounds, and comprehending texts. However, rather than becoming discouraged, learners demonstrated persistence by practicing regularly, seeking assistance from teachers, and participating actively in reading activities. These findings support Ehri's Theory of Word Reading Development (2005), which explains that children gradually develop automatic word recognition through repeated exposure to print and systematic instruction. Similarly, Castles et al. (2018) emphasized that explicit literacy instruction combined with consistent practice significantly strengthens foundational reading competencies and promotes long-term reading success.

The fourth theme, *Connecting Reading to Everyday Life and Indigenous Culture*, underscores the value of contextualized and culturally responsive literacy instruction. Learners expressed greater interest and comprehension when reading materials reflected their local environment, indigenous traditions, family experiences, and community life. Stories related to farming, mountains, forests, animals, and local celebrations enabled learners to connect printed texts with familiar experiences, thereby enhancing comprehension and engagement. These findings support Gay's (2018) framework on culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes that integrating learners' cultural backgrounds into instruction enhances academic achievement and learner motivation. Likewise, Cummins (2021) argued that culturally relevant literacy instruction strengthens both reading competence and learners' cultural identity, making literacy more meaningful and inclusive.

The fifth theme, *Growing as Independent and Motivated Readers*, illustrates the transformative outcomes of meaningful literacy instruction. Participants described becoming increasingly confident in reading independently, understanding stories, helping younger siblings read, and viewing reading as an enjoyable lifelong activity. Their narratives indicate that foundational reading literacy extends beyond academic competence by fostering self-confidence, autonomy, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation. These findings align with Guthrie and Wigfield (2020), who asserted that reading engagement develops when learners experience competence, autonomy, and meaningful interactions with texts. Similarly, Schiefele et al. (2023) found that motivated readers exhibit stronger comprehension, greater reading persistence, and sustained literacy growth.

Collectively, the findings indicate that developing foundational reading literacy requires supportive educational environments characterized by engaging instruction, positive teacher-learner relationships, active family participation, culturally relevant learning experiences, and opportunities for repeated reading practice. These interconnected experiences promote not only reading proficiency but also children's confidence, motivation, identity, and lifelong appreciation for literacy.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the development of foundational reading literacy among early grade learners at Bukig Elementary School is a gradual and transformative process shaped by meaningful literacy experiences, supportive relationships, repeated practice, and culturally responsive instruction. The lived experiences of the participants demonstrate that learning to read extends beyond recognizing letters and words; it involves developing confidence, comprehension, motivation, and the ability to connect reading with everyday life.

The findings reveal that engaging literacy instruction characterized by storytelling, guided reading, interactive activities, and contextualized learning fosters children's curiosity and enjoyment of reading. Teacher encouragement and family involvement further strengthen learners' confidence by providing emotional support, constructive feedback, and continuous opportunities for reading practice. These supportive relationships create positive literacy experiences that encourage children to persevere despite encountering reading difficulties.

The study likewise concludes that contextualized literacy instruction plays a crucial role in improving reading comprehension and learner engagement. Reading materials reflecting learners' indigenous culture, local environment, and community experiences enable children to construct meaning more effectively while strengthening their appreciation of their cultural identity. Consequently, literacy instruction becomes more relevant, inclusive, and meaningful.

Ultimately, foundational reading literacy contributes not only to improved academic performance but also to children's holistic development as confident, motivated, culturally grounded, and independent learners. Strong literacy foundations established during the early grades prepare children for lifelong learning and future academic success.

Educational Implications

The findings provide valuable implications for literacy education, curriculum development, teacher education, and educational policy.

For teachers, literacy instruction should extend beyond phonics and alphabet recognition by incorporating storytelling, guided reading, shared reading, play-based literacy activities, and contextualized instructional materials that promote meaningful reading experiences. Teachers should also implement differentiated instruction to address the diverse literacy needs of beginning readers.

For school administrators, strengthening school-based reading programs requires continuous investment in classroom libraries, developmentally appropriate reading materials, literacy-rich learning environments, and professional development opportunities that enhance teachers' expertise in early literacy instruction.

For curriculum developers, literacy curricula should continue emphasizing balanced literacy instruction that integrates phonological awareness, decoding, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, oral language, and culturally responsive teaching practices. Reading materials should reflect learners' local culture, language, and community experiences to improve engagement and comprehension.

For teacher education institutions, pre-service teachers should receive intensive preparation in the Science of Reading, early literacy development, literacy assessment, differentiated instruction, family literacy engagement, and culturally responsive pedagogy. These competencies are essential for preparing future teachers capable of supporting diverse beginning readers.

For educational policymakers, continued implementation of national literacy initiatives should prioritize resource allocation for reading interventions, teacher professional development, culturally relevant instructional materials, and stronger partnerships among schools, families, and communities to improve foundational literacy outcomes.

Contributions to Literacy Education

This study contributes significantly to the fields of early childhood education, reading education, literacy development, and qualitative educational research.

First, it contributes one of the few phenomenological investigations that explore the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners in developing foundational reading literacy within a rural and indigenous Philippine educational setting.

Second, the study expands current understanding by demonstrating that literacy development is a multidimensional process involving cognitive, emotional, social, motivational, and cultural experiences rather than merely acquiring technical reading skills.

Third, the proposed Foundational Reading Literacy Development Framework (FRLDF) provides an evidence-based model that may guide teachers, literacy coordinators, curriculum developers, and school administrators in designing learner-centered literacy instruction and sustainable reading intervention programs.

Finally, the findings contribute to the growing body of international literature supporting culturally responsive literacy education, early reading intervention, and learner-centered pedagogical practices. By emphasizing meaningful literacy experiences, strong home-school partnerships, and contextualized instruction, the study provides practical and theoretical insights that can strengthen literacy education and improve foundational reading outcomes among young learners in diverse educational contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **For Teachers**

Early grade teachers should continue implementing learner-centered and developmentally appropriate literacy instruction that extends beyond alphabet recognition to include phonological awareness, vocabulary development, reading fluency, comprehension, and reading motivation. Classroom instruction should integrate storytelling, shared reading, guided reading, interactive literacy games, and contextualized reading materials that reflect learners' cultural backgrounds and everyday experiences. Teachers are likewise encouraged to employ differentiated instruction and continuous formative assessment to address the diverse literacy needs of beginning readers.

2. **For School Administrators**

School administrators should strengthen school-based reading programs by providing adequate instructional resources, classroom libraries, leveled reading materials, and literacy-rich learning environments. Continuous professional development activities focusing on evidence-based literacy instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and reading intervention strategies should also be provided to teachers. Furthermore, schools should establish stronger partnerships with parents and community stakeholders to sustain literacy initiatives beyond the classroom.

3. **For Parents and Families**

Parents should actively participate in their children's literacy development by creating supportive home literacy environments that encourage shared reading, storytelling, conversations, and independent reading. Establishing regular family reading routines and providing positive encouragement can significantly strengthen children's confidence,

vocabulary development, and love for reading. Families should collaborate closely with teachers in monitoring learners' reading progress and reinforcing literacy skills at home.

4. For Curriculum Developers

Curriculum developers should continue strengthening foundational literacy competencies within the MATATAG Curriculum by integrating culturally responsive instructional materials, indigenous stories, contextualized reading passages, and learner-centered literacy activities. Reading materials should reflect learners' local culture, language, environment, and experiences to improve engagement and comprehension while preserving cultural identity.

5. For Teacher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions offering teacher education programs should intensify pre-service preparation in early literacy development, the Science of Reading, literacy assessment, differentiated instruction, family literacy engagement, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Teacher education curricula should also provide extensive field experiences that allow future teachers to implement evidence-based literacy instruction in diverse educational settings.

6. For the Department of Education

The Department of Education should continue expanding national literacy initiatives by increasing access to quality reading materials, strengthening teacher training programs, supporting school-based reading interventions, and promoting community-based literacy projects. Greater investment in literacy monitoring systems and early intervention programs can help reduce learning gaps among beginning readers and improve national literacy outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

First, the study involved only fifteen (15) early grade learners from Bukig Elementary School in Asipulo, Ifugao. Although this sample size is appropriate for descriptive phenomenological research, the findings are context-specific and are not intended for statistical generalization to all early grade learners in the Philippines.

Second, the investigation focused exclusively on the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners. Perspectives from teachers, parents, school administrators, and literacy coordinators were not included. Their inclusion might have provided additional insights into children's literacy development from multiple viewpoints.

Third, the participants belonged to a single rural and culturally diverse elementary school. Consequently, the findings may reflect educational experiences unique to indigenous and geographically isolated communities and may differ from those of learners in urban or other educational contexts.

Finally, because the study relied primarily on qualitative interviews, classroom observations, and reading conversations, the findings represent participants' perceptions and experiences during the period of data collection. Changes in literacy practices, instructional approaches, or educational policies over time may influence future learners' experiences.

Implications for Future Research

Future researchers may consider conducting similar phenomenological investigations involving larger and more diverse participant groups from different geographical regions of the Philippines to determine whether comparable literacy experiences emerge across various educational settings.

Comparative qualitative studies involving urban and rural schools, indigenous and non-indigenous communities, or public and private schools may provide a broader understanding of contextual influences on foundational reading literacy development.

Researchers may also employ mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs to examine the relationship between learners' lived experiences and measurable reading outcomes over time. Such studies can provide stronger evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of literacy interventions and instructional approaches.

Future investigations should also explore the perspectives of teachers, parents, school leaders, and literacy coordinators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing early literacy development.

Additional studies examining the effectiveness of culturally responsive literacy instruction, digital literacy resources, multilingual reading programs, and family literacy interventions are likewise recommended. These investigations may contribute to the continuous improvement of literacy education in diverse Philippine educational contexts.

Practical Applications of the Study

The findings of this study have practical significance for educational practice and policy.

Teachers may utilize the identified themes to design literacy lessons that emphasize meaningful engagement, contextualized reading experiences, learner motivation, and individualized support. Understanding learners' lived experiences enables teachers to create more responsive and inclusive literacy instruction.

School administrators may use the proposed Foundational Reading Literacy Development Framework (FRLDF) as a guide for strengthening school reading programs, teacher mentoring initiatives, classroom library development, and literacy intervention projects.

Curriculum developers may integrate the study's findings into the development of localized instructional materials that reflect indigenous culture, community experiences, and authentic literacy contexts while supporting the goals of the MATATAG Curriculum.

Teacher education institutions may incorporate the findings into courses on early childhood education, reading education, literacy instruction, and qualitative educational research to better prepare future teachers for evidence-based literacy instruction.

Finally, educational policymakers may use the findings to inform literacy policies that strengthen foundational reading programs, promote family literacy engagement, and support culturally responsive teaching practices aimed at improving literacy outcomes among beginning readers.

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