

Improving the reading skills of learning in multigrade classes: experiences from the ASEAN countries

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Abstract: This systematic review explored interventions and practices to enhance reading skills in multigrade classes across ASEAN countries, guided by the PRISMA 2020 approach. A total of 47 relevant articles and reports were examined to determine current strategies and implementation gaps.

Findings revealed that ASEAN countries exhibit both shared and distinct practices in promoting reading literacy among multigrade learners. Brunei Darussalam implements four key strategies, including Early Literacy Packs and a Bilingual Education Policy, while Lao PDR emphasizes household literacy development and a structured reading curriculum. Myanmar shows limited national efforts, though early childhood reading is promoted in some remote homes. Cambodia focuses on teacher training as its primary strategy. Indonesia has adopted large-scale initiatives like the USAID PRIORITAS project and the School Literacy Movement. Malaysia promotes literacy through classroom practices and non-formal education programs supported by the government. In Singapore, the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) and the integration of technology are central to literacy promotion. Thailand advances reading culture through rural reading programs, teacher capacity-building, and English for Youth Learners (EYL), while Vietnam engages learners through home-based reading games and community reading activities, also highlighting the TEYL program.

In the Philippines, although various strategies are observed, they are less targeted toward reading in multigrade settings. Common practices include the use of the Daily Lesson Log (DLL), the LEPO framework, and differentiated instruction (DI) to manage diverse learners, yet these are not specifically tailored to reading development. The Department of Education's recognition program for multigrade teachers incentivizes best practices, but parental and community involvement in reading remains minimal compared to other ASEAN nations.

Challenges across the region also vary. In the Philippines, gaps are rooted in limited teacher training, insufficient funding, and lack of early literacy support at home. Lao PDR faces weak pedagogical support and a lack of materials, while Myanmar struggles with language barriers and undertrained teachers. Cambodia reports teacher shortages, especially for those adept in managing multigrade classrooms. Indonesia's use of multigrade classes in small schools with excess teachers can lead to suboptimal instructional practices. Although countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam report fewer issues, rural areas still face teacher shortages, prompting cross-border recruitment efforts.

Overall, while ASEAN countries show promising literacy initiatives, there is a persistent need for targeted reading programs, improved teacher training, and inclusive community engagement, particularly for multigrade education systems.

Keywords: Work-related stress factors, Recreational sports engagement, Teaching effectiveness, MAPEH Teachers and Wellness Program

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most essential skills and a person's starting point for learning everything around him. It is fundamental to achieving and maintaining learning in school and throughout life. This skill enables learners to comprehend text, images, and their message, expand their knowledge of beliefs and practices, ensure that these are passed down to the next generation, and connect their previous experiences with their new learning (Torres, 2021).

It is a fundamental skill to fully engage in many areas of life, from education to employment and civic engagement. There is strong evidence to show that the early acquisition of reading skills is one of the best predictors of later educational success (Evans & Hares, 2021).

Human beings have been reading to understand the rapidly changing structure of society and to adapt to this structure since the invention of writing to the present. Reading can be defined as the process of making sense in a regular environment in line with an appropriate method and purpose, based on effective communication between the author and the reader, with the cooperation of cognitive behaviors and psychomotor skills (Akyol, 2015).

On the other hand, teaching a broad range of grade levels in the same classroom is complex and demanding. Teachers throughout the world teach in multigrade classes at more than one grade level, and it has been predicted that the number of multigrade classes will increase in the future. However, the teacher's role is central to effective teaching and learning in this kind of setup, and it has been observed that teachers experience problems dealing with multigrade classes.

The Multigrade System has been implemented since the 1920s. It has always been covered by policies on monograde class organization, which resulted in multigrade classes. The multigrade system has been with us for quite some time. Still, it is not regarded as a very viable alternative delivery system to provide access to basic education as well as quality education by giving complete grade levels in all public elementary schools. The officials of the Department of Education have long recognized the existence of multigrade classes. Still, it was only under the leadership of Secretary Armand Fabella that the multigrade program was launched as a systematic and viable means of meeting the goals and providing education for all.

The existence of the multigrade classes in our country is also embodied in the provision of the Philippine Constitution. Considering the present thrusts of the government to make at least elementary education genuinely accessible to all, particularly to children in remote barangays, a policy has been made and declared to build a school in all school-less barangays where enrolment and population growth trends warrant the establishment of a new school and develop and or implement the Multigrade System of Delivery. This is to enable children to complete their elementary education with the help of the trained teachers' experts in handling multigrades, particularly in areas where it is uneconomical to put up six-classroom multigrade classes to bring more children to school.

It has always been said that multigrade teaching is more of a challenge than a single-grade multigrade classroom. Callahan (2012) stressed that the skills and behavior required of the multigrade teacher may be different, and coordinating activities can even be more difficult. In relation, Salvacion Indigenous Community Elementary School (SICES) belongs to a Geographically Isolated Disadvantaged Area (GIDA). It is one of the schools most affected in terms of reading proficiency, in which 18 out of 34 pupils in multigrade 4,5, and 6 are identified as non-readers, which means that they have difficulty in recognizing letter sounds and the letters themselves. Statistically speaking, the number of non-readers shows poor academic performance

of the pupils and has a significant impact on achieving quality education as anchored to the DepEd vision, mission, and core values.

With the enactment of D.O No. 70, s. 2011, also known as the Every Child A Reader Program (ECARP), addressed the problem of reading in the Philippines. The use of the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) as a tool in assessing the reading skills of the pupils is highly indicated and stipulated in ECAR P. An organized administration of the tool by following the sequence shows an effective way of using the tool, and the classification of reading materials is also elaborated. Other reading materials are also recommended for building and assessing vocabulary development.

In addition, English is considered an international medium of instruction across the discipline and plays a vital role in the learning development of pupils. It is essential in the learning process of the pupils and in understanding the content of the lesson. It develops the mind and imparts knowledge and lessons of life. It helps you understand the world around you better. Addressing the needs of the school in improving the reading skills of the multigrade pupils through the hands of the teachers is the best way to boost the confidence of the teachers in facilitating activities such as reading. So, a low number of non-readers will be achieved.

In line with this, the researcher will devise this study to propose and develop a reading program based on the systematic literature review of multigrade reading programs in the ASEAN context. It is one way of benchmarking the effective reading programs of the ASEAN countries implementing multigrade and having a reading program.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to create reading strategies or programs for SICES multigrade based on the systematic literature review of improving the reading skills of learners in multigrade classes in the ASEAN countries. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What practices do multigrade classes in other ASEAN countries that resulted in the improvement in the reading skills of the elementary pupils?
2. What practices do multigrade classes in the selected school in the Philippines contribute to the improvement in the reading skills of elementary pupils?
3. What gaps in the implementation of multigrade schools in the Philippines and other ASEAN countries can be extracted from the systematic review?
4. Based on the findings from the systematic review, what program can be proposed for the multigrade schools in the Philippines?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study used a pure systematic literature review of the published literature and studies related to the research objectives. Hence, pieces of evidence and data are driven by published studies and literature.

Locale of Study

The systematic review was conducted using several search engines, including Elsevier Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer Link, JSTOR, and ERIC, as well as a web-based academic search engine called Google Scholar.

Data Gathering Instruments

The study used a pure systematic literature review of the reading program amongst ASEAN countries. This study used purposive random sampling to identify the ASEAN countries. There were 35 SICES pupils who conducted the reading program based on the review of the ASEAN context. Using a meta-analysis search string and criteria on the topic of reciprocal teaching and its effect on reading comprehension in multigrade classes, relevant research was extracted from journal articles, theses, chapter books, and conference proceedings.

Based on the inclusion criteria, only relevant studies were considered based on the: (a) must be relevant to practices and challenges in the multigrade classes with emphasis on reading, (b) the study focused on the efforts and gaps in multigrade classes or reading in early child literacy, and (c) published from the period of 2011-2023.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study employed a purely systematic approach using the PRISMA model 2020. This method was also used in Blanco's thesis (2023). Primary sources of data are five electronic databases, including Elsevier Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer Link, JSTOR, and ERIC, as well as a web-based academic search engine called Google Scholar.

Due to its capability to compile a sizable quantity of freely available scholarly articles, Google Scholar will be taken into consideration for inclusion in searches for proof (Haddaway et al., 2015; Shaffril et al., 2020). The Figure below shows the PRISMA 2020 diagram for systematic review.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The systematic review examined various practices and interventions employed by ASEAN countries to enhance reading literacy among elementary pupils in multigrade settings, highlighting significant national efforts as well as existing gaps. Recognizing that school attendance alone does not equate to functional literacy, as underscored by UNESCO's 2013 report on global illiteracy despite formal schooling, the review focused on identifying effective reading-related interventions in multigrade classes.

In other ASEAN countries, several best practices emerged. Brunei Darussalam implemented Early Literacy Packs, national reading campaigns, bilingual education policies, and household-level literacy interventions, reflecting a government-wide commitment to early literacy. Lao focused on curriculum reform and partnerships like the Child Literacy Development Program, emphasizing text comprehension and joyful reading. Cambodia invested heavily in teacher training, parental engagement, and NGO-supported reading programs. Indonesia advanced literacy through USAID's PRIORITAS project and the School Literacy Movement, focusing on teacher development and material support. Malaysia emphasized home-based reading interventions and literacy programs from the Ministry of Rural Development. Singapore upheld high literacy through the Reading and English Acquisition Programme (REAP) and strong school-family-state collaboration. Thailand promoted reading through public policy initiatives and teacher upskilling, including the English for Young Learners policy. Vietnam fostered early literacy through household reading games, community activities, and the Teaching English in Young Learners program. Myanmar showed isolated home-based reading efforts but lacked consistent national programs.

In the Philippines, a range of classroom-based strategies were identified across multigrade schools. These included Daily Lesson Logs (DLLs) for structured teaching, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, instructional material sharing, and curriculum indigenization. Schools also adopted the Escuela Nueva model, differentiated instruction, and emphasized teacher capability building. Notable local innovations included the use of "little teachers," partitioning classes, and strong teacher-parent collaboration in some districts. The Search for the Multigrade Teacher Achiever exemplified institutional recognition of excellence in multigrade teaching. However, community and household-based reading activities, widely practiced in other ASEAN countries, were notably limited in the Philippine context.

Despite these efforts, several gaps were uncovered. In the Philippines, rural multigrade schools face teacher shortages, lack of multigrade-specific training, inadequate resources, and poor physical infrastructure. Teachers often compensate for these deficits from personal funds. Learners' socioeconomic conditions and lack of early home literacy exposure also hinder reading development. In Lao, challenges include insufficient teacher training, lack of materials, and high opportunity costs for school attendance. Myanmar struggles with multilingual classrooms, untrained teachers, and a chronically underfunded system. Cambodia faces teacher scarcity and overcrowded classes, especially in rural areas. Indonesia battles improper deployment of multigrade teaching and limited state support. While fewer studies discuss Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, common issues include a shortage of trained multigrade teachers and limited documentation of reading-specific strategies in multigrade settings.

Overall, the review reveals that while many ASEAN countries have initiated impactful literacy programs—ranging from national campaigns to community-based and technological interventions—the specific needs of multigrade learners, particularly in marginalized regions, remain under-researched and insufficiently addressed. The Philippine multigrade system, in particular, could benefit from adapting international best practices involving community participation, parental engagement, and external stakeholder involvement to enhance the reading competencies of learners in multigrade classes.

CONCLUSION

Based on the synthesized findings, the paper concludes that while numerous reading promotion initiatives exist across ASEAN countries, they are generally implemented in rural areas and are not explicitly tailored for multigrade classes. This underscores a persistent gap in addressing the distinct needs of multigrade education, presenting an opportunity for targeted interventions. In the Philippine context, reading practices are likewise not specifically designed for multigrade settings. Furthermore, the country lags behind in implementing early childhood literacy experiences and community-based reading initiatives due to socioeconomic constraints. These gaps suggest that effective practices from other ASEAN nations—such as early literacy programs, parental involvement, and community engagement—may serve as valuable benchmarks for enhancing reading outcomes in Philippine multigrade classes. The review also identifies national challenges such as insufficient funding, limited human resources, and adverse socioeconomic conditions as major barriers to effective multigrade literacy implementation. Therefore, a localized intervention program that integrates early literacy and community-based strategies is recommended to address these deficiencies and improve reading skills among learners in Philippine multigrade schools.

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