

The Missing Links in the Literacy Programs in Philippine Basic Education: Lens from Veteran Implementors of Literacy Programs

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ABSTRACT:

Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study examined the systemic and programmatic gaps in literacy initiatives within Philippine basic education from the perspective of experienced implementers. Despite ongoing reforms, literacy outcomes in the country continue to reflect persistent challenges, suggesting the presence of missing links in program design, instructional practices, and support systems. This study explored how veteran literacy program implementers specifically Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers from the Surigao del Sur Division perceive these gaps and identify practical strategies for strengthening literacy development. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed. Eighteen seasoned ALS teachers with extensive experience in literacy instruction participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' experiences and perspectives regarding literacy program implementation. The findings revealed several interconnected gaps affecting literacy development. These include limited cultural relevance in literacy materials, instructional practices that emphasize decoding more than comprehension, restricted opportunities for authentic writing, and varying levels of home and institutional support. These issues reflect the influence of multiple environmental systems shaping literacy learning, consistent with the ecological framework guiding the study. Participants also identified strategies that support stronger literacy outcomes, including contextualized reading materials, strengthened foundational reading instruction, consistent integration of writing activities, and improved collaboration among schools, families, and community stakeholders. The study provides practitioner-based insights into how literacy programs operate in real educational contexts and highlights the importance of coordinated support across instructional, institutional, and community environments. These findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the missing links in literacy program implementation and offer direction for strengthening literacy initiatives within Philippine basic education.

Keywords: Missing Links, Literacy Programs, Philippine Basic Education

1. Introduction

Literacy is widely recognized as a foundational skill that shapes students' academic trajectories and long-term learning opportunities (Minoza, 2025; Garil, 2024). Within the Philippine basic education system, however, literacy continues to present persistent challenges, as evidenced by national assessments and international comparative studies that reveal ongoing gaps in learners' reading and writing proficiency (Tolentin, 2023; IMJRISE, 2023; Divinagracia, 2024). These findings indicate that while literacy initiatives have expanded across the country, many learners still struggle to attain the level of reading comprehension and written expression required for effective participation in academic learning and social life. Scholars argue that these continuing difficulties suggest that existing literacy programs may not fully address the diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic realities experienced by Filipino learners across different communities (William, Lara, & Lola, 2025; Garil, Abbas, & Limen, 2024). Despite sustained government efforts and programmatic interventions aimed at strengthening literacy instruction, discrepancies between policy intentions and classroom practices remain evident. Such inconsistencies highlight the need to examine how literacy programs operate in real educational contexts and how they are experienced by the teachers responsible for implementing them (Soriano, 2025; Estoque, 2023).

Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, this study conceptualizes literacy development as a process influenced by multiple interconnected environmental systems that shape both teaching and learning. Bronfenbrenner's framework explains that a child's development occurs within nested ecological layers, beginning with the immediate environments in which learners directly interact, such as the classroom and home (microsystem), followed by the relationships among these settings (mesosystem), institutional structures including school administration and education policies (exosystem), and broader

socio-cultural, linguistic, and economic conditions that define the educational landscape (macrosystem) (Guy-Evans, 2024). Applying this perspective to literacy education emphasizes that reading and writing development cannot be attributed solely to instructional strategies or classroom resources. Rather, literacy outcomes emerge from the dynamic interaction between learners, teachers, families, institutions, and societal influences. From this ecological standpoint, challenges in literacy programs may reflect systemic misalignments across these multiple levels rather than isolated classroom deficiencies (Bonior, 2016; Ceneciro, 2025). Consequently, understanding the complexities of literacy program implementation requires examining how these interconnected environmental systems shape both opportunities and barriers to literacy development (Panerio, 2025; Murro, 2024).

Within this context, a notable gap in existing scholarship concerns the limited empirical attention given to the perspectives of veteran literacy program implementers. Much of the literature on literacy education in the Philippines focuses on learner outcomes, policy frameworks, or curriculum structures, while comparatively fewer studies capture the lived experiences of educators who directly implement literacy initiatives in schools and alternative learning settings. Veteran implementers possess extensive professional knowledge developed through years of classroom practice, program adaptation, and interaction with diverse learner populations. Their experiences provide valuable insights into the practical realities of literacy instruction, including the challenges encountered when translating policy into classroom practice and the strategies developed to address contextual constraints (Fuentes, 2022; Quisay & Aquino, 2024). Examining these perspectives is therefore critical for identifying the "missing links" that may not be immediately visible in formal program documents but become evident during actual implementation.

This study specifically focuses on experienced Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers who have long been engaged in literacy instruction among diverse and often marginalized learners in Philippine educational contexts. ALS educators operate within unique instructional environments where students may differ significantly in age, prior schooling experiences, language backgrounds, and socio-economic circumstances. As a result, these teachers frequently navigate complex instructional challenges while adapting literacy programs to meet learners' immediate needs. Their professional insights provide an important lens through which the effectiveness, limitations, and contextual relevance of existing literacy initiatives can be more deeply understood. By documenting and analyzing these perspectives, the study contributes to a more grounded understanding of literacy program implementation in real educational settings.

To investigate these perspectives, the study employed an exploratory qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with eighteen seasoned literacy teachers. The interview guide was developed based on themes identified in existing literature on literacy program implementation, including instructional challenges, systemic barriers, and program improvement strategies. Questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences with literacy instruction, describe perceived gaps in current programs, and share practical strategies that have proven effective in supporting learners' literacy development. This design allowed participants to articulate their professional insights while ensuring that the discussions remained aligned with the central research objectives. The interview data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis, an interpretive qualitative method that emphasizes the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Reflexive thematic analysis involves iterative processes of data familiarization, coding, theme development, and analytical reflection, enabling researchers to examine how participants

construct meaning based on their experiences and professional contexts. This analytical approach is particularly appropriate for studies seeking to capture complex professional insights because it allows themes to emerge inductively from participants' narratives while also situating them within broader theoretical frameworks. Through this process, the analysis revealed recurring themes related to misaligned literacy materials, inconsistent systemic support, limitations in teacher preparation, and varying levels of family and community engagement, all of which influence the effectiveness of literacy programs in practice (Chavez & Unga, 2024).

The findings of the study demonstrate that literacy program gaps are not confined to instructional techniques but extend across multiple ecological layers of the educational environment. Veteran implementers described challenges related to program design, curriculum alignment, institutional expectations, and socio-cultural contexts that shape how literacy instruction is delivered and experienced in classrooms. Their insights also highlighted practical strategies aimed at strengthening literacy development, including contextualized teaching approaches, sustained teacher professional development, stronger school–community partnerships, and program structures that better reflect the realities of learners and educators. Examining literacy programs through this ecological lens, the study contributes empirical evidence that can inform more coherent, context-responsive, and sustainable literacy initiatives within the Philippine basic education system (Casingal, 2025; Tolentin, 2023; Espartero, Calzada, & Prado, 2024; Garil, Entong, Muarip, et al., 2024).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Status of Literacy in Philippine Basic Education

Literacy development remains a central concern within the Philippine basic education system, as multiple studies consistently report persistent difficulties in students' reading proficiency and comprehension. Esteban, Calang,

and Pagador (2024) conducted a systematic review of reading instruction in the Philippines and found notable mismatches between traditional teaching strategies and the evolving needs of contemporary learners. Their findings indicate that many literacy approaches remain rooted in conventional instructional practices that emphasize mechanical reading skills while insufficiently addressing learner motivation, engagement, and contextual relevance. These instructional misalignments contribute to limited student participation in reading activities and hinder the development of deeper comprehension skills necessary for academic success. Similarly, Tomas, Villaros, and Galman (2021) documented that a substantial proportion of Filipino learners remain at the “frustration” level in both English and Filipino reading assessments. This level suggests that students experience difficulty reading texts independently and require continuous instructional support. Such findings highlight the persistent gap between expected literacy competencies and the actual reading abilities demonstrated by learners across various grade levels. The continuing presence of these gaps indicates that national literacy initiatives, while extensive in scope, may not fully address the diverse linguistic backgrounds, learning conditions, and socio-economic realities of students in different educational contexts. Beyond classroom instruction, research also emphasizes the role of family and home environments in shaping literacy development. Chavez, Adalia, and Alberto (2023) highlight that parental support and motivation significantly influence children’s English language learning and reading engagement. Their findings suggest that active parental involvement, including encouragement, reading supervision, and provision of literacy resources, contributes to improved language acquisition outcomes. Complementing this perspective, Chavez (2022) examined narratives from bilingual parents regarding the real-life use of English and found that everyday language practices at home often differ from the formal expectations embedded within school curricula. This discrepancy reveals an important contextual dimension of literacy

development, suggesting that effective literacy programs must consider the alignment between school-based instruction and learners’ lived linguistic experiences.

2.2 Inconsistencies and Systemic Gaps in Program Implementation

While literacy policies and curricular frameworks exist within the Philippine education system, challenges frequently arise during their actual implementation in schools. Abejuela, Akut, Del Rosario, and Balane (2022) examined the reading curriculum in basic education and identified a notable misalignment between the intended curriculum, assessment systems, and the instructional practices carried out by teachers in classrooms. Although literacy competencies are clearly articulated in national policy documents, the translation of these competencies into effective teaching practices often remains inconsistent. This disconnect suggests that literacy programs may encounter structural limitations that hinder the consistent delivery of intended learning outcomes. These implementation gaps are further compounded by challenges associated with evolving educational environments, particularly in the context of digital and blended learning modalities. Chavez and Lamorinas (2023) emphasize that assessment practices must be continuously adapted to reflect changes in instructional delivery, particularly in online or technology-assisted learning environments. Their study highlights the importance of aligning evaluation methods with instructional objectives to ensure that assessments accurately capture learners’ literacy development. Without such alignment, assessment outcomes may fail to reflect students’ actual abilities, thereby limiting the effectiveness of literacy interventions. The presence of these systemic inconsistencies demonstrates that literacy challenges cannot be attributed solely to classroom instruction. Instead, they reflect broader structural issues involving curriculum design, institutional support systems, and policy implementation processes. When curricular expectations, teaching practices, and assessment mechanisms are not adequately coordinated,

literacy programs may struggle to produce consistent improvements in student learning outcomes. Addressing these systemic gaps therefore requires coordinated efforts among educators, administrators, and policy makers to ensure that literacy initiatives operate coherently across different levels of the education system.

2.3 Resource Limitations and Inequitable Access

Resource availability plays a critical role in determining the effectiveness of literacy instruction, particularly in educational settings characterized by diverse socio-economic conditions. Tomas et al. (2021) identified several barriers to reading development, including non-mastery of essential reading elements, the presence of learners at risk of academic difficulties, and the absence of a strong culture of reading within schools and communities. Their mixed-methods investigation revealed that many students struggle to develop reading proficiency due to limited exposure to appropriate instructional materials and insufficient opportunities for sustained reading practice. To address these challenges, Tomas et al. (2021) recommend the development of contextualized reading programs tailored to the needs of specific learner populations. Such initiatives include individual reading recovery interventions, targeted remediation strategies, and enrichment activities designed to support learners at different proficiency levels. These recommendations underscore the importance of flexible program design that accommodates variations in learner abilities, language backgrounds, and educational experiences. More than the availability of physical learning materials, broader structural inequalities also influence access to quality literacy resources. Chavez, Lamorinas, and Ceneciro (2023) argue that digital platforms and online instructional materials may unintentionally reinforce existing educational disparities. Their analysis of online discourse patterns demonstrates how digital content can sometimes reproduce biased messaging or exclusionary narratives, thereby shaping learners' perceptions of language and literacy. These findings suggest that literacy

programs must not only provide adequate resources but also ensure that instructional materials are culturally inclusive, empowering, and accessible to diverse learner populations.

2.4 Teacher Capacity and Professional Development Needs

Teacher competence remains one of the most influential factors in determining the effectiveness of literacy instruction. Esteban et al. (2024) highlight that despite the increasing integration of digital technologies in education, empirical research examining how teachers incorporate technology into reading instruction in the Philippine context remains limited. This gap suggests that educators may require additional training to effectively utilize digital tools and instructional technologies in ways that support literacy development. Further evidence of these challenges emerges from the work of Alcayde and Basilan (2023), who investigated teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties faced by students with reading challenges. Their findings reveal that many educators encounter obstacles such as inadequate teaching aids, limited access to specialized instructional materials, and difficulties addressing the emotional and motivational needs of struggling readers. These conditions place additional demands on teachers, who must simultaneously address diverse learner needs while managing limited classroom resources. Recent studies also highlight emerging pedagogical challenges associated with technological and linguistic developments in education. Chavez, Cuilan, and Mannan (2024) discuss the ethical and instructional dilemmas encountered by teachers when integrating artificial intelligence tools and digital platforms into educational settings. Their findings illustrate how rapid technological change requires educators to continuously adapt their teaching practices while maintaining academic integrity and pedagogical effectiveness. Similarly, Adalia, Chavez, and Hayudini (2025) emphasize the importance of grammar and linguistic competence for contemporary learners, particularly among Generation Z students who interact with language across multiple digital

platforms. Together, these studies demonstrate that sustained professional development and institutional support are essential to ensure that teachers remain equipped to address evolving literacy demands.

2.5 Effective Practices & Supporting Literacy Success

A growing body of research identifies instructional practices that contribute to improved literacy outcomes when implemented effectively. Lagdaan and Sevilla (2025) conducted a systematic review synthesizing findings from twenty empirical studies on reading comprehension strategies. Their analysis highlights the effectiveness of evidence-based instructional approaches such as reciprocal teaching, SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review), graphic organizers, guided reading, and multisensory teaching methods. These strategies support learners in developing comprehension skills by encouraging active engagement with texts and promoting deeper cognitive processing during reading activities. At the secondary education level, Ligudon and Ildefonso (2022) found that English teachers frequently employ structured reading strategies across the stages of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities. This structured approach allows teachers to scaffold learners' understanding by activating prior knowledge, guiding comprehension during reading, and encouraging reflective analysis afterward. Such instructional sequencing enables students to engage with texts more meaningfully and enhances their ability to interpret and evaluate information. Complementing these approaches, Chavez and Anuddin (2024) highlight the role of experiential literacy activities, such as campus journalism programs, in strengthening students' grammar awareness and writing confidence. These applied literacy practices provide learners with authentic opportunities to use language for real communicative purposes. Similarly, Magno et al. (2024) demonstrate that alternative teaching strategies tailored to linguistic diversity can significantly improve literacy outcomes among learners who speak different dominant languages.

Their findings emphasize that culturally responsive instruction plays an important role in ensuring that literacy programs remain relevant and effective for diverse student populations.

Scholars increasingly advocate for comprehensive approaches that address both instructional and systemic factors influencing literacy development. Esteban et al. (2024) propose the PREACT framework Policy, Research, Empirical study, Curriculum adaptation, Community engagement, and Teacher training as a multidimensional strategy for strengthening reading instruction in the Philippines. This framework emphasizes the importance of aligning policy initiatives with classroom practices, research evidence, and community participation in order to create sustainable literacy interventions. Complementing this framework, Tomas et al. (2021) recommend the development of school-based literacy curricula that respond directly to learners' needs and contextual realities. Their proposed interventions include reading recovery programs, enrichment initiatives, and targeted instructional support designed to accommodate diverse learner profiles. Such localized approaches allow schools to implement literacy strategies that reflect the linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics of their student populations. Family involvement also emerges as a crucial component of sustainable literacy programs. Chavez, Comerros, and Cuilan (2024) highlight the influence of parental discretion in shaping children's language learning experiences, emphasizing the importance of family engagement in literacy development. Similarly, Chavez, Adalia, and Alberto (2023) demonstrate that parental motivation and support play a significant role in sustaining learners' literacy progress over time. Collectively, these studies underscore that effective literacy programs require coordinated efforts across educational institutions, families, and communities. Strengthening program coherence, ensuring equitable access to resources, supporting teacher development, and fostering active family participation remain essential strategies for

addressing the long-standing literacy challenges in Philippine basic education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine the perspectives of veteran Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers from the Surigao del Sur Division regarding the gaps and missing elements in Philippine basic education literacy programs. An exploratory design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to obtain rich and in-depth insights from experienced ALS practitioners who are directly involved in literacy instruction for diverse and often marginalized learners. Exploratory qualitative research is particularly useful in studies that seek to identify patterns, meanings, and contextual experiences that are not yet extensively documented in existing literature. In this study, the design enabled the researchers to capture the lived experiences, professional reflections, and practical observations of veteran ALS teachers regarding the implementation of literacy programs.

The study was also conceptually informed by Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that educational outcomes are shaped by multiple interacting environmental systems. Applying this theoretical lens allowed the researchers to interpret the experiences shared by ALS teachers within broader contexts such as classroom instruction, school environments, home support systems, and policy structures. This perspective helped frame the investigation of the “missing links” in literacy programs as interconnected factors within a wider educational ecosystem. Through this design, the study identified confirmed findings related to recurring instructional gaps, implementation challenges, and context-based strategies emerging from the extensive field experience of ALS practitioners.

3.2. Population and sampling

The study involved 18 veterans Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers from the Surigao

del Sur Division who have extensive experience in implementing literacy programs within Philippine basic education. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess rich and relevant experience related to the research topic. The selection criteria focused on teachers who had several years of service in ALS instruction, direct engagement in literacy program implementation, and sustained involvement in working with diverse learner populations. The participating ALS teachers represent practitioners who regularly facilitate literacy learning among out-of-school youth, adult learners, and students who require alternative educational pathways. Their professional roles involve delivering literacy instruction, adapting curriculum materials, and addressing contextual barriers that affect learners’ reading and writing development. Selecting experienced ALS teachers who have been actively engaged in literacy instruction, the study ensured that the data gathered reflected credible, experience-based insights regarding instructional practices, program implementation challenges, and systemic gaps in literacy initiatives.

3.3. Instrument

Data for this study were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed to gather detailed insights regarding the gaps, challenges, and improvement strategies related to literacy programs in Philippine basic education. The development of the interview questions was guided by the research objectives of the study and by existing concerns in literacy program implementation within the ALS context. The questions were formulated to explore two key dimensions:

- (1) the identification of gaps or missing elements in literacy programs, and
- (2) the strategies and recommendations proposed by experienced implementers to enhance literacy program effectiveness.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to share detailed experiences, reflections, and contextual

observations while maintaining a consistent framework of inquiry across all interviews. This format provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their responses and introduce relevant insights based on their professional experiences. The interview guide was therefore designed to encourage participants to discuss

actual classroom experiences, instructional challenges, and program implementation issues, ensuring that the information gathered directly addressed the study's objectives. Table 1 presents the list of guide questions used by this research study.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview question
1. To explore the perspectives of veteran literacy program implementers on the gaps or missing elements in Philippine basic education literacy programs.	1. From your experience, what are the most significant gaps or missing elements in current literacy programs in Philippine basic education? 2. Can you describe specific challenges you have encountered while Implementing literacy programs in schools? 3. How do these gaps affect students' literacy development and overall learning outcomes?
2. To examine the strategies and recommendations proposed by veteran implementers to enhance the effectiveness of literacy programs In Philippine basic education.	1. What strategies have you found most effective in improving literacy among students in basic education? 2. Can you share any recommendations for enhancing the design or Implementation of literacy programs in schools? 3. How can schools and educators better support literacy programs to ensure their success and sustainability?

3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews conducted with each of the 18 ALS teacher participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times to ensure participants could share their experiences comfortably and without disruption to their professional responsibilities. Each interview session was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate documentation of responses. In addition to audio recordings, the researchers also maintained field notes during the interviews to document contextual observations, significant expressions,

and non-verbal cues that could enrich the interpretation of the data. The interviews focused on participants' actual experiences in literacy program implementation, including the instructional challenges they encountered, the gaps they observed in program design or delivery, and the strategies they used to support learners' literacy development. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure that participants' responses were accurately captured for systematic analysis.

3.5. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative analytical approach that focuses on identifying and interpreting meaningful patterns within qualitative

data. This method was appropriate for the study because it enabled the researchers to systematically examine the narratives and experiences shared by veteran ALS teachers while allowing flexibility in interpreting the meanings embedded in their responses. Reflexive thematic analysis recognizes the active role of the researcher in the interpretation process and supports the generation of themes that reflect both participants' perspectives and contextual realities. The analysis began with a thorough familiarization with the interview data. The researchers carefully read and re-read the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and insights regarding literacy program implementation. During this stage, significant statements and recurring ideas related to instructional practices, implementation challenges, and perceived gaps in literacy programs were noted.

Following this familiarization stage, the researchers conducted systematic coding of relevant segments of the transcripts. Codes were assigned to meaningful units of data that reflected issues related to literacy program gaps, instructional difficulties, support systems, and effective teaching strategies within the Alternative Learning System. These codes were then examined and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities. Through an iterative process of comparison and refinement, related codes were organized into emerging themes that represented shared patterns across participants' responses. The themes were further reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately reflected the experiences described by the participants and addressed the objectives of the study. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the broader educational contexts influencing literacy development.

The interpretation of the themes was also informed by Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that educational outcomes are shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems. Using this theoretical perspective, the researchers examined how various contextual

factors such as classroom practices, home environments, institutional support, and policy structures influenced the implementation of literacy programs. The resulting thematic structure provided a comprehensive understanding of the identified gaps and the strategies used by ALS teachers to support literacy development within their educational settings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were carefully observed throughout the conduct of this study to ensure the protection and respect of all participants. Prior to data collection, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as research participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews were conducted. The researchers also ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly maintained. Personal identifiers were not included in the transcripts or in the reporting of the findings, and pseudonyms or general descriptions were used when referring to participants' responses. All interview sessions were audio-recorded only with the participants' permission to ensure accurate documentation of the discussions. The recordings and transcripts were used solely for research purposes and were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. The researchers maintained professional integrity and respect throughout the research process to ensure that the participants' experiences and perspectives were represented accurately and responsibly.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore the perspectives of veteran literacy program implementers on the gaps or missing elements in Philippine basic education literacy programs.

Question No. 1. From your experience, what are the most significant gaps or missing elements in

current literacy programs in Philippine basic education?

1.1 Limited Cultural Relevance in Literacy Materials

Eight (8) participants emphasized that literacy instruction often lacks materials that reflect the social realities, identities, and lived experiences of Filipino learners. Teachers observed that although programs such as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) aim to promote linguistic inclusivity, the availability of localized and culturally meaningful texts remains limited. As a result, instruction frequently defaults to standardized materials written in Filipino or English. Respondents also explained that classroom practices tend to prioritize identifying correct answers and predetermined interpretations rather than encouraging learners to connect texts with their personal experiences or cultural contexts. This situation limits opportunities for learners to see language as a tool for personal expression and identity development.

"A major gap in current literacy programs is the lack of culturally responsive literature that reflects the lived realities, identities, and emotional worlds of Filipino learners."

"In classrooms, discussions often emphasize extracting the correct theme or author's message, leaving little room for personal interpretation or identity-building."

1.2 Emphasis on Decoding Rather Than Comprehension

Five (5) participants reported that literacy instruction often concentrates on basic reading mechanics such as word recognition, pronunciation, and vocabulary drills. While these foundational skills are necessary, teachers observed that instructional practices frequently stop at this level and do not consistently guide learners toward deeper comprehension and interpretation. Participants explained that students rarely engage in analytical reading activities such as comparing texts, examining perspectives, or evaluating arguments. The absence of structured opportunities for higher-level engagement with texts limits students' ability to develop critical reading skills needed for

academic learning and real-world information processing.

"It often remains stuck at surface-level skills such as decoding, vocabulary drills, and literal Q&A, without moving into the deeper cognitive work that true comprehension requires."

"Students have limited exposure to multiple texts, paired readings, or contrasting perspectives, which curtails their ability to synthesize information, compare arguments, and navigate the complex, multimodal texts that define contemporary life."

1.3 Limited Opportunities for Authentic Writing

Five (5) participants identified the absence of sustained writing practice as another significant gap in literacy programs. Teachers reported that writing tasks are often restricted to short exercises and structured formats that prioritize correctness over expression. Such activities provide limited opportunities for learners to explore ideas, develop narratives, or communicate meaningful messages. Respondents also noted that writing is typically completed only for teacher evaluation, which reduces students' awareness of audience and purpose. Without authentic writing experiences, learners may perceive writing as a rigid academic requirement rather than a practical tool for communication and self-expression.

"A major gap in current literacy programs is the lack of a writing-rich environment that meaningfully develops students' ability to express ideas, craft narratives, and communicate with purpose."

"Most writing is directed solely to the teacher for grading, students lack opportunities to write for authentic audiences or real purposes, diminishing their awareness of tone, clarity, and impact."

Question No. 2. Can you describe specific challenges you have encountered while implementing literacy programs in schools?

2.1 Curriculum Demands

Five (5) participants explained that many learners enter secondary school without fully developed foundational reading skills. Teachers described a significant gap between curriculum

expectations and students' actual literacy levels. Although literacy programs provide structured lessons and standardized materials, they often assume that students already possess essential decoding and comprehension abilities. Respondents shared that strict pacing guides and performance expectations make it difficult for teachers to slow down instruction or revisit fundamental skills when necessary.

"Many Grade 7 students enter high school without strong decoding or comprehension skills, creating a mismatch between their actual literacy levels and the demands of the curriculum."

"The pacing guide was my biggest enemy. It demanded that we move through skills at lightning speed, a new phonics pattern every day, a new comprehension strategy every week."

2.2 Limited Home Support

Eight (8) participants identified the lack of consistent reading support at home as a major challenge in sustaining literacy development. Teachers observed that while some students have access to books, gadgets, and digital learning platforms, these resources do not always translate into meaningful reading engagement. Respondents explained that reading must often compete with highly stimulating digital entertainment, making it difficult for learners to maintain interest in sustained reading activities. Participants also noted that parents may prioritize academic performance but may not consistently model reading habits or supervise literacy routines at home.

"Many students may have access to books, devices, or literacy apps, yet motivation to read remains low because reading must compete with fast, stimulating screen-based entertainment"

"School administrators often pressure teachers to produce quick, visible results, test scores, events, or outputs that look good for marketing, forcing programs to focus on short-term achievements rather than meaningful, long-term literacy growth."

2.3 Language and Literacy Instruction Barriers

Five (5) participants reported that instructional practices sometimes emphasize

technical reading skills without fully supporting deeper understanding and interpretation. Teachers observed that students may successfully pronounce words and recall vocabulary definitions but still struggle with analytical reading tasks. According to the respondents, similar patterns appear in writing activities, where students are often expected to follow rigid templates with limited opportunities to revise or refine their ideas. These constraints reduce students' exposure to meaningful reading and writing experiences that support critical thinking and communication skills.

"Literacy instruction in many schools remains heavily focused on decoding skills and vocabulary drills, resulting in students who can pronounce words and define terms but struggle to think critically about what they read."

"This pattern extends to writing, which becomes formulaic and rigid; students are expected to follow templates, submit one-draft outputs, and rarely engage in creative expression, drafting, or revision."

Question No. 3. How do these gaps affect students' literacy development and overall learning outcomes?

3.1 Surface-Level Reading

Eight (8) participants explained that when literacy instruction emphasizes mechanical reading skills without deeper engagement, students tend to develop limited comprehension abilities. Teachers observed that learners may read aloud fluently but struggle to interpret meaning, identify themes, or understand figurative language. According to the participants, this pattern creates dependence on direct cues from teachers or texts, preventing learners from independently constructing meaning and developing interpretive thinking.

"When students are trained mainly in decoding, vocabulary drills, and literal Q&A, they develop into surface-level readers, learners who can read aloud fluently but struggle to understand meaning beyond the words."

"The students also struggle with subtle or figurative language. They miss symbolism, irony, point of view, and thematic nuances, which makes literature feel confusing or boring."

3.2 *Restricted Writing Limits Idea Development*

Five (5) participants indicated that rigid writing instruction affects students' ability to organize and communicate complex ideas. Teachers explained that when writing activities rely heavily on templates and formulaic structures, students focus more on meeting format requirements than developing original thought. As a result, learners may struggle to expand ideas, connect arguments, or explore alternative perspectives in their writing.

"When writing instruction focuses mainly on rigid structures like introduction, body, conclusion, and fill-in-the-blank exercises students learn to produce text that looks correct rather than expresses thought."

"Vocabulary and expressive range remain limited because students rely on memorized phrases or simple words, avoiding richer language for fear of being wrong."

3.3 *Low Engagement Reduces Sustained Reading*

Five (5) participants highlighted that limited motivation significantly affects students' literacy performance. Teachers observed that when reading materials fail to connect with students' interests or experiences, learners may disengage from reading tasks. According to the participants, disengaged students often rely on shortcuts such as summaries or external assistance instead of interacting directly with texts. This pattern reduces opportunities for learners to develop independent comprehension, critical thinking, and interpretive skills.

"Even when students have access to books, devices, and literacy apps, they often underperform because reading is not emotionally or personally meaningful."

"Disengaged readers often rely on summaries, notes, or AI-generated responses instead of interacting with the text themselves."

Research Objectives 2. To examine the strategies and recommendations proposed by veteran implementers to enhance the effectiveness of literacy programs in Philippine basic education.

Question No. 1. What strategies have you found most effective in improving literacy among students in basic education?

1.1 *Building Engagement Through Choice-Based Reading*

Five (5) participants highlighted the importance of first establishing emotional engagement before introducing formal literacy instruction. Teachers observed that students are more willing to read when texts reflect situations and themes they can personally relate to. Selecting stories connected to everyday experiences, teachers create an environment where learners feel that reading reflects their own lives rather than being purely academic. Participants also described the effectiveness of allowing students to select their own reading materials, which reduces resistance and increases voluntary participation in reading activities.

"I begin every reading cycle with stories that mirror students' lives like family conflicts, crushes, humor, and drama."

"A key component is choice-based reading. I let students pick whatever grabs their interest like manga, Wattpad, fan fiction, lyrics, sports articles, game guides, or humor posts."

1.2 *Strengthening Foundational Reading Competencies*

Five (5) participants emphasized that literacy development becomes more sustainable when students first gain confidence in fundamental reading mechanics. Teachers explained that learners who struggle with word recognition or decoding often become discouraged because reading requires excessive effort. Focusing on systematic phonics instruction, vocabulary development, and decoding fluency, educators can help students process texts more efficiently. Participants noted that strengthening these core skills reduces cognitive overload and allows learners to gradually shift attention toward understanding and interpreting what they read.

"I still believe that strong literacy begins with systematic phonics, decoding fluency, and vocabulary mastery."

"I also emphasize vocabulary growth. Teaching word parts, context clues, and morphology expands the range of texts students can access."

1.3 Frequent Writing Into Literacy Instruction

Eight (8) participants expressed that integrating regular writing activities into literacy instruction significantly improves students' comprehension and analytical skills. Teachers explained that writing requires learners to process ideas, interpret meanings, and articulate their understanding of texts. Because of this, respondents described incorporating reflective and creative writing tasks that encourage students to engage more deeply with reading materials. Through these integrated practices, writing becomes a complementary process that reinforces reading comprehension and supports higher-level thinking.

"I've learned that students who write regularly don't just become better writers, they understand texts more deeply."

"I also assign creative extensions like alternative endings, added scenes, or dialogue rewrites. To do this well, students must thoroughly understand the original text's tone, logic, and themes."

Question No. 2. Can you share any recommendations for enhancing the design or implementation of literacy programs in schools?

2.1 Literacy Activities Build Student Motivation

Five(5) participants emphasized that effective literacy programs must intentionally cultivate students' motivation to read. Teachers explained that learners engage more actively when reading materials are relevant to their interests and when classroom activities promote participation and interaction. Participants recommended providing opportunities for students to explore themes that reflect their personal interests and contemporary culture. They also suggested incorporating collaborative and creative literacy activities that allow learners to connect reading with discussion, reflection, and shared experiences.

"I emphasize that motivation is not a reward but a prerequisite for reading stamina, and students will not engage deeply if texts feel irrelevant to their lives."

"I stress the importance of purpose-driven tasks such as writing fan theories, producing mini-documentaries, or participating in debates which give reading real-world meaning and micro-wins to build confidence."

2.2 Early Mastery of Foundational Reading Skills

Five (5) participants recommended that literacy programs strengthen their focus on early reading instruction by ensuring that students develop strong decoding and phonics skills during the early years of schooling. Teachers explained that comprehension difficulties often originate from weak foundational skills rather than a lack of effort or exposure to texts. According to the participants, literacy instruction should follow a clear and structured progression so that learners develop reading fluency before being required to perform more complex comprehension tasks.

"Early mastery of phonics and decoding remains the single most reliable predictor of reading success, yet many programs underestimate its importance, scattering instruction across as-needed moments."

"Teachers also caution against rushing students into comprehension worksheets or higher-order tasks before decoding skills are secure, as comprehension will naturally fail without a solid foundation."

2.3 Embedding Writing as a Core Literacy Practice

Eight (8) participants shared that integrating writing activities consistently within literacy programs to support comprehension and communication skills. Teachers explained that writing encourages learners to reflect on texts, organize ideas, and express interpretations in their own words. Participants suggested incorporating various forms of writing tasks that connect directly to reading materials so that students can process their understanding more deeply. They also noted that collaborative writing activities and digital platforms can increase student engagement while providing opportunities for feedback and improvement.

"Writing should be treated as a daily, meaningful practice rather than a project-based task, because students who write consistently develop deeper

comprehension, stronger vocabulary, and more confidence in expressing ideas."

"We also suggest strategies like collaborative writing and writing conferences, which provide feedback in a supportive context, and the use of digital platforms for writing like blogs, forums, and multimedia stories which make writing more engaging and relevant to students' lives."

Question No. 3. How can schools and educators better support literacy programs to ensure their success and sustainability?

3.1 Early Literacy Through Systematic Instruction

Eight (8) participants emphasized the importance of investing in structured literacy instruction during the early stages of learning. Teachers explained that systematic phonics and decoding instruction help students develop reading fluency, which is essential for comprehension. Participants also noted that literacy instruction should follow a gradual progression in which learners first master basic decoding skills before moving toward more complex reading tasks. Continuous monitoring and targeted support were also recommended to address emerging reading difficulties at an early stage.

"Investing in systematic phonics and decoding skills in the early years is crucial because it lays the foundation for fluent reading, which is essential for comprehension. "

"Instruction should combine explicit modeling, guided practice, and independent application, while formative assessments and targeted interventions address decoding gaps in real time."

3.2 Grammar Instruction Within Writing

Five (5) participants suggested that grammar instruction becomes more meaningful when integrated into students' actual writing processes rather than taught through isolated drills. Teachers explained that learners understand grammatical concepts more effectively when they apply them directly to their own sentences and compositions. This approach allows students to see grammar as a practical tool for improving communication rather than a separate academic

subject. Participants also observed that contextualized grammar instruction encourages learners to reflect on how language choices influence meaning and expression.

" Teaching grammar in context during revision of students' own writing will help students see language rules as meaningful tools rather than abstract drills."

"Integrating grammar with writing encourages higher-order thinking, since students must analyze how language choices affect meaning, tone, and style, rather than merely memorizing rules."

3.3 Encourages Reading Engagement

Five (5) participants highlighted that access to books and learning resources alone does not guarantee literacy development. Teachers explained that students must also experience reading as an enjoyable and socially meaningful activity. Schools can encourage this by organizing collaborative reading activities and creating opportunities for students to share their reading experiences with peers. Participants also emphasized that recognition of student progress can strengthen motivation and reinforce positive reading habits over time.

"Resources like books, libraries, and digital devices are necessary but insufficient for fostering strong literacy. Without motivation, students often fail to engage deeply, or rely on summaries rather than authentic comprehension."

"Peer influence and recognition can reinforce positive reading habits. Celebrating milestones, showcasing student writing, or providing opportunities to share reading reflections creates a sense of accomplishment and belonging."

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the gaps identified by veteran literacy implementers reflect broader structural issues within literacy program design and implementation. From the perspective of ecological systems theory, literacy development is influenced by interconnected environmental layers rather than isolated instructional practices. Guys-Evan (2024) and El Zaatar and Maalouf (2022) explained that Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework

demonstrates how classroom learning is shaped by the interaction between school structures, family contexts, and broader social influences. Similarly, Bacal and Ormilla (2022) argued that literacy challenges in Philippine alternative learning environments often emerge when these systems operate in isolation rather than through coordinated support mechanisms. In the same way, Phyllis et al. (2024) emphasized that learners' literacy outcomes are strongly influenced by overlapping ecological environments, including instructional contexts, institutional policies, and socio-cultural experiences. These perspectives support the present findings, which show that literacy gaps are not limited to classroom instruction but emerge from multiple interconnected factors shaping how literacy programs function in real educational settings.

One of the most visible patterns emerging from the findings concerns the curriculum dimension of literacy programs, particularly the limited cultural relevance of instructional materials and the narrow focus on mechanical reading skills. Idulog et al. (2023) observed that reading instruction in the Philippines frequently relies on traditional approaches that emphasize decoding accuracy while providing fewer opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful interpretation and contextual reading experiences. Supporting this view, Gildore et al. (2025) explained that effective literacy instruction requires strategies that promote comprehension, reflection, and higher-order thinking rather than relying exclusively on basic word recognition activities. In addition, Clement and John (2024) demonstrated that literacy outcomes improve when teaching approaches acknowledge linguistic diversity and incorporate culturally responsive materials that reflect learners' backgrounds. These studies help explain the present findings in which teachers reported that literacy materials sometimes fail to connect with students' lived experiences, thereby reducing the relevance and engagement of reading activities.

Beyond curriculum content, the findings also highlight challenges related to instructional practices within classrooms, particularly the

imbalance between foundational reading instruction and deeper comprehension development. Liugan and Lacostales (2026) reported that many Filipino learners remain at the frustration level of reading because instructional practices often concentrate on mechanical decoding without sufficiently guiding learners toward analytical understanding. Similarly, Suryati et al. (2023) explained that teachers frequently encounter difficulties in addressing diverse literacy needs because of limited instructional resources and insufficient support for differentiated teaching strategies. From a pedagogical perspective, Agbevivi and Adogba (2022) emphasized that structured reading instruction involving pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities helps learners develop deeper comprehension and interpretive skills. These insights support the teachers' observations in the present study that literacy instruction sometimes remains at the surface level of reading, limiting students' ability to interpret complex texts and develop critical literacy competencies.

The study further reveals that literacy development is strongly influenced by the home and community environment, which corresponds to the microsystem and mesosystem layers described in ecological systems theory. Van Steensel and Jongerling (2025) found that parental encouragement, reading supervision, and emotional support significantly influence children's motivation to engage in literacy activities. Everyday language use within families shapes how learners understand and interact with literacy practices introduced in school. Likewise, Ashirafu and Silaji (2024) emphasized that parental decisions regarding learning routines and language exposure can either strengthen or weaken children's literacy development. These studies reinforce the findings of this research, where teachers reported that limited home reading support and competing digital distractions often reduce students' motivation to sustain reading engagement beyond the classroom. Another important dimension emerging from the findings involves institutional and policy structures, which correspond to the

exosystem and macrosystem levels in Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. Olabiyi et al. (2025) observed that literacy policies in the Philippine education system are often clearly defined at the national level but may encounter inconsistencies during local implementation. In addition, Donegan et al. (2021) noted that reading intervention programs sometimes struggle to produce sustained improvements when institutional expectations prioritize short-term performance indicators over long-term literacy development. Curriculum reforms require continuous teacher support and institutional coordination to ensure that policy intentions translate into effective classroom practices. These insights align with the experiences shared by ALS teachers in this study, who reported that program implementation sometimes prioritizes visible outputs rather than the gradual and sustained development of literacy competencies.

The strategies proposed by veteran implementers in this study also demonstrate how literacy programs can be strengthened through integrated and context-responsive approaches. PREACT framework, which highlights the importance of aligning policy initiatives, curriculum design, community engagement, and teacher training to strengthen reading instruction. Similarly, Wulandari and Pujaningsih (2025) emphasized that literacy development becomes more effective when evidence-based comprehension strategies are combined with active learner engagement and contextual learning activities. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2023) illustrated that authentic literacy practices such as journalism writing and creative communication activities can enhance learners' confidence and language awareness. These perspectives support the teachers' recommendations in the present study that literacy programs should integrate meaningful reading choices, regular writing activities, and collaborative learning experiences to strengthen students' literacy engagement. From a policy and practice perspective, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening coordination between educational institutions, teachers, families, and communities in order to

improve literacy outcomes. Socio-cultural factors significantly influence reading comprehension, suggesting that literacy programs must address both academic and contextual learning conditions. Supporting this view, Nurmahanani (2023) found that effective reading programs require coordinated management practices at both the macro and micro levels of the education system. Learning engagement increases when instructional initiatives create meaningful experiences that extend beyond isolated classroom activities. These insights reinforce the ecological interpretation of the present findings, which demonstrate that sustainable literacy improvement requires collaboration across multiple systems rather than relying solely on classroom interventions.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The findings were derived from the perspectives of eighteen veteran ALS teachers from a single division, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other educational contexts in the Philippines. Educational experiences may vary significantly across different geographic and institutional settings, particularly in communities with varying access to learning resources. Literacy development is shaped by multiple contextual factors, including family dynamics, peer relationships, and institutional conditions, which may differ across regions. Furthermore, teacher experiences during literacy instruction are influenced by local school environments and resource availability. Future studies may therefore expand the scope of participants to include teachers from different educational systems, administrators, and learners in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of literacy program implementation.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the perspectives of veteran Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers regarding the gaps in literacy programs in Philippine basic education. Guided by the Ecological Systems Theory, the findings show that literacy challenges extend beyond classroom instruction and are shaped by interconnected

factors involving curriculum design, instructional practices, home environments, and institutional support systems. The results indicate that several gaps continue to affect literacy development, including limited cultural relevance of reading materials, an instructional focus on decoding rather than deeper comprehension, restricted opportunities for authentic writing, and inconsistent support from home and school environments. The findings also highlight that literacy programs become more effective when instruction balances foundational reading skills with meaningful engagement in reading and writing activities. Teachers emphasized the importance of contextualized reading materials, sustained writing practices, and learning activities that connect literacy with students' lived experiences. Strengthening literacy programs therefore requires coordinated efforts across multiple levels of the education system, including improved curriculum alignment, strengthened teacher support, increased family involvement, and institutional structures that prioritize long-term literacy development rather than short-term performance indicators. This study contributes to a clearer understanding of the "missing links" in literacy program implementation from the

perspective of experienced practitioners who work directly with diverse learners. However, the findings are limited to the experiences of ALS teachers from one division, which may not fully represent literacy conditions in other educational contexts. Future research may expand the scope of investigation by including participants from different regions, school types, and educational stakeholders such as administrators, parents, and learners. Broader investigations may provide deeper insights into how literacy programs can be designed and implemented more effectively across the Philippine education system.

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