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From Dark to Light: Elucidating the Cases of Successful Readers

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Abstract

Illiteracy remains a major educational challenge despite technological advances. This qualitative multiple case study explored the experiences and challenges of Grade 7 successful readers at Godwino Integrated School. Semi-structured interviews were used to examine the experiences and challenges of the five cases. The data gathered was analyzed by using thematic analysis which resulted to five emerging themes on their experiences as successful readers: reading anxiety and fear of judgement, inadequate reading skills and vocabulary deficits, lack of literacy support at home, peer, teacher, and family intervention as remedial support, and aspirations to help others. Five emerging themes were included in the challenges encountered as successful readers: difficulty with word recognition and reading materials, low self-esteem and emotional distress, lack of early and consistent support systems, self-initiated strategies and adaptive efforts, and social influence and motivation from others. The five cases have similarities in their experiences of having reading anxiety and fear of judgement, and family intervention as remedial support. However, regarding the challenges encountered, only one case differs from the five cases in terms of a lack of early and consistent support system.

Keywords: *Illiteracy, reading experiences, reading challenges, successful readers, Grade 7 students*

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INTRODUCTION

In the ASEAN context, the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019, which assessed Grade 5 learners, found that low-performing learners in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Philippines could only identify relationships between words and their meanings, highlighting gaps in reading proficiency (Marquez, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic school closures and disruptions have deepened the crisis, sharply increasing learning poverty and exacerbating the inequalities in education (World Bank et al., 2022)

The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) research revealed that the Philippines ranked lowest in Reading Comprehension, scoring 340 out of the 78 countries surveyed. Additionally, the 2022 PISA test indicated that the Philippines placed in the bottom 10 among 81 countries in reading comprehension and showed minimal improvement, ranking 76th out of 81 countries (OECD, 2022).

To assist Filipino students, the Department of Education (DepEd) launched a reading intervention program called Bawat Bata Bumabasa (3Bs) through DepEd Memorandum No. 173, s. 2019. Teachers are advised to use the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHIL-IRI) in classroom instruction. This tool helps diagnose reading difficulties and identify each student's reading level. More recently, through DepEd Memo No. 001, s. 2024, DepEd implemented "Catch-Up Fridays", mandating that all Fridays throughout the school year be designated as Catch-Up Fridays. This initiative focuses on operationalizing the National Reading Program (NRP) during the first half of the day's schedule and fostering Values, Health, and Peace Education in the second half.

In the Surallah Central District, all seventh-grade learners were assessed at the beginning of the school year to determine their reading levels using the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHIL-IRI) group screening test. Centrala National High School has 33 struggling readers among the 106 enrolled seventh-grade students. In contrast, Colongulo National High School has 39 struggling readers among its 104 enrolled seventh-grade students, according to the reading coordinators at both schools. At Godwino Integrated School, the adviser and the English high school reading coordinator confirmed that there are 18 struggling readers at the frustration level and 7 identified non-readers out of 41 seventh-grade students.

Similarly, the What Works Clearinghouse (2022) emphasizes the need for intensive reading instruction that strengthens foundational skills, particularly decoding and fluency, to improve reading outcomes among struggling learners. This study emphasized the importance of tailored, engaging instruction to help struggling readers develop essential literacy skills. Although Phi-IRI has been conducted and some remedial classes have been held, more than 50% of those enrolled in Grade 7 are still at the frustration level. Given this data, the researcher planned to conduct a study exploring the experiences and challenges of the Grade 7 successful readers. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies on successful readers in rural areas. Hence, this proposed study.

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Research Questions

The study investigated the experiences and challenges of successful Grade 7 readers at Godwino Integrated School. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of successful readers?
2. What are the challenges encountered by successful readers?
3. What explains the similarities and differences of each case?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology employed in the study. It includes the research design, research participants, study locale, sampling technique, and data-gathering procedures.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the experiences and challenges of Grade 7 struggling readers. A case study approach is appropriate for conducting an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018; Priya, 2021). By focusing on five (5) Grade 7 students at Godwino Integrated School, this research sought to understand their unique experiences and the challenges they encountered in developing their reading skills.

The qualitative methodology allows a detailed exploration of the students' lived experiences, providing rich, context-specific insights into their struggles and successes (Creswell, 2014). The data collection process involved interviews, which facilitated the elicitation of narratives and perspectives directly from participants. Braun and Clarke (2019) described thematic analysis as a method for analyzing qualitative data. This approach is ideal for identifying and interpreting patterns and themes within the responses, ensuring the findings reflect participants' voices and realities.

On the other hand, a case study is a research method that dives deep into a specific group, person, or situation while examining it in its real-life setting. It pays special attention to the details and unique experiences of those involved (Yin, 2018). This study used the case study approach to understand the experiences of five (5) Grade 7 students from Godwino Integrated School. It examined their experiences and challenges as struggling readers.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Barangay Canahay, Surallah, South Cotabato. It was established in 1959 as Godwino Elementary School. It was converted into an integrated school in 2016 at the request of the school community and parents to offer secondary education to elementary graduates from the barangay and neighboring barangays. Canahay is one of the 17 barangays in the municipality of Surallah. This rural barangay has a population of 3,042, as determined by the 2020 Census. This represented 3.40% of the total population of the Municipality of Surallah. Canahay is situated at approximately 6.2831, 124.7407, on the island of Mindanao. Elevation at these coordinates is estimated at 317.5 meters or 1,041.7 feet above mean sea level.

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This barangay has two schools in one of its sitios: one integrated and one elementary. As DepEd Order No. 40, s.2014 describes, integrated schools offer basic education from kindergarten through grade 10 or 12. They are designed to promote diversity, respect, and understanding among students from different backgrounds. They are established to provide accessible education in areas without schools, where the number of elementary graduates does not justify a separate secondary school, and to ensure that elementary graduates can continue their education locally.

Participants of the Study

The study focused on the five (5) pre-identified struggling readers in Grade 7 at Godwino Integrated School in Barangay Canahay, Surallah, South Cotabato, during the school year 2024-2025. These five (5) students are the children of the Ilonngo and Tboli farmers in the said barangay.

Inclusion criteria include being officially enrolled as Grade 7 learners and pre-identified as frustration readers based on the Phil-IRI standards. A student at the "frustration level" in reading comprehension experiences significant difficulty understanding texts independently, often demonstrating weaknesses in reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension that may hinder successful engagement with reading materials (Dawang et al., 2025).

Students identified as belonging to instructional and independent levels are excluded from this study because they can tackle reading activities with minimal teacher help. Those identified as non-readers are also excluded since they should receive different intervention measures, such as phonological awareness and phonics.

Sampling Technique

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the study subjects. Only those identified as readers at the frustration level based on the Phil-IRI standards were included. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting individuals or groups based on their characteristics to best answer a research question. Nikolopoulou (2022) also called this technique judgmental sampling since it relies on the researcher's judgment when identifying and selecting the individuals, cases, or events that can provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives. This study included only those identified as readers at the frustration level based on the Phil-IRI standards.

Data Gathering Procedures

The data gathering procedure commenced upon the graduate school's approval to conduct the study. After the approval, the researcher formulated the interview questions to obtain detailed responses from each participant about their experiences and challenges as struggling readers. To assess the validity and reliability of the interview questions regarding appropriateness and adequacy, they underwent validation by three expert validators.

After validation, the researcher sought permission from the school head and Grade 7 adviser of Godwino Integrated School to conduct the study. To ensure ethical compliance, the researchers obtained parental consent from all participants. Before formal data collection, the

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researchers conducted a trial interview to refine the interview questions and strengthen their probing techniques. Individual interviews were then scheduled and conducted in succession, allowing participants to share their experiences and thoughts.

During the interviews, participants were briefed on their rights, including the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses. They were informed of the topics discussed, the expected duration of the interviews, and how the recordings would be securely stored. When participants expressed discomfort, the interview protocol or questions were adjusted. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, translated, and transcribed into English (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The transcripts were shared with participants for review to ensure accuracy and reflect their perspectives. Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study. Given the case study approach, the research prioritized understanding participants' personal experiences and cultural interpretations, aligning with the principles outlined by Stake (1995).

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study employed a qualitative multiple case study design and approach to explore the experiences and challenges of five Grade 7 struggling readers who eventually demonstrated progress toward becoming successful readers. It was conducted at Godwino Integrated School in Barangay Canahay, Surallah, South Cotabato, during the school year 2024–2025, with data collection and participant engagement undertaken from the third week of February to March 2025. Participants were purposively selected based on the following criteria: they were officially enrolled Grade 7 learners and were identified as frustration-level readers based on the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory standards; learners classified at the independent or instructional levels, and those identified as non-readers, were excluded. The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed, semi-structured interview guide, validated by three experts and researchers from educational institutions and refined through a trial interview. Individual interviews were audio-recorded, translated, transcribed into English, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns across the participants' experiences and challenges.

The investigation focused solely on the participants' experiences and challenges in developing from struggling readers toward successful readers, as gathered through semi-structured individual interviews. It did not examine learners from other grade levels, schools, reading classifications, or geographical settings, so its findings are limited to the specific cases and context covered by the study. The study's small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also affect the accuracy of the findings due to possible response bias or participants' limited ability to articulate their experiences. Furthermore, the study's focus on a single school and a specific time frame restricts the applicability of the results to other contexts and periods.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1. Cross-Case Analysis on Reading Experiences of Grade 7 Successful Readers

Themes on Reading Experiences	Case Unit		Remarks
	Similarities	Differences	
Reading Anxiety and Fear of Judgment	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		All participants felt nervous and embarrassed when asked to read aloud due to fear of mispronunciation or being laughed at by classmates. This fear resulted in avoidance or lack of confidence in reading tasks.
Inadequate Reading Skills and Vocabulary Deficits	1, 2, 3, 5	4	Cases 1, 2, 3, and 5 struggled with decoding, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Case 4 had some vocabulary gaps but could still read when translated to Filipino, making him relatively more proficient.
Lack of Literacy Support at Home	1, 2, 3, 5	4	Participants lacked consistent reading support at home due to chores (1, 2), distraction from gadgets (3), or absence of active guidance (5). Case 4 had support from his grandmother who practiced reading with him.
Peer, Teacher and Family Intervention as Remedial Support	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		All participants improved their reading with help from more knowledgeable others (MKO): classmates, teachers, or family members like grandmothers or siblings. Support was often given through modeling and correction.
Aspirations to Help Others	5	1, 2, 3, 4	Only Case 5 explicitly expressed a personal commitment to practice reading daily, aiming to become confident and help others. Others improved but didn't mention goals to support fellow learners.

Table 2. Cross-Case Analysis on Challenges Encountered by Grade 7 Successful Readers

Themes on Reading Experiences	Case Unit		Remarks
	Similarities	Differences	

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Difficulty with Word Recognition and Reading Materials	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		All five case participants encountered difficulty with word recognition, particularly with long or unfamiliar words, including subject-specific vocabulary and environmental print.
Low Self-esteem and Emotional Distress	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		All participants expressed feelings of nervousness, shame, or fear of judgment due to their inability to read fluently. These emotions were tied to social situations (e.g., being called in class or reading in public).
Lack of Early and Consistent Support Systems	1, 2, 3, 4	5	Most participants lacked early structured reading support and only received targeted help later (Grade 6 or 7). Case 5 had earlier exposure through school remediation programs starting Grade 5, supported by teachers and family.
Self-Initiated Strategies and Adaptive Efforts	1, 2, 3, 4, 5		Most participants lacked early structured reading support and only received targeted help later (Grade 6 or 7). Case 5 had earlier exposure through school remediation programs starting Grade 5, supported by teachers and family.
Social Influence and Motivation from Others	5, 1, 2, 3, 4		All five participants were positively influenced by family, classmates, or teachers. These influences either offered emotional motivation (e.g., encouragement) or practical guidance (e.g., reading assistance and modeling).

Experiences of Grade 7 Successful Readers

The discussion of findings reveals that successful Grade 7 readers faced significant emotional, cognitive, and environmental barriers to reading development. Key themes include reading anxiety and fear of judgment, inadequate word recognition and vocabulary skills, lack of home literacy support, the positive impact of peer, teacher, and family interventions, and emerging aspirations to help others. These findings highlight how emotional factors like fear and low self-confidence, compounded by skill deficits and limited support systems, hinder reading progress. However, with targeted interventions and social scaffolding, students can overcome

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these challenges and even develop a desire to support peers. This suggests that recovery from reading difficulties can lead to academic and personal growth.

Emerging Theme 1: Reading Anxiety and Fear of Judgment

The participants' experiences showed that reading anxiety and fear of judgment interfered with their confidence, concentration, and willingness to participate in classroom reading activities. All five learners expressed discomfort when required to read aloud because they feared mispronouncing words, making mistakes, or receiving negative reactions from their classmates. This finding corresponded with Li and Gan (2022), who found that reading comprehension was influenced not only by vocabulary knowledge but also by learners' motivation and capacity to regulate their reading behavior. When readers experienced anxiety, they appeared less able to focus on meaning because their attention shifted toward possible errors and others' reactions. Their fear therefore affected both their emotional engagement and their ability to apply appropriate comprehension strategies.

The participants' reluctance to read publicly also reflected weak confidence in their reading competence. Heyne, Gnambs, Lockl, and Neuenhaus (2023) established that reading motivation, metacognitive knowledge, and strategy awareness contributed to the development of reading literacy. In the present study, however, anxiety appeared to prevent the learners from using these resources effectively. Although some participants knew that they could reread, pause, or use contextual clues, they became preoccupied with performing correctly in front of their peers. Their awareness of being observed increased their hesitation and made oral reading feel like a public evaluation rather than an opportunity to practice and understand a text.

Fear of negative peer judgment further intensified the participants' reading anxiety. Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek, and Winberg (2022) found that learners became more motivated to read when classroom practices provided interesting texts, suitable levels of difficulty, social support, and meaningful opportunities for participation. The participants' accounts suggested that these supportive conditions were weakened when classmates laughed, corrected them harshly, or reacted impatiently to their mistakes. Consequently, peer interaction became a source of embarrassment rather than encouragement. This situation explained why some learners preferred silent reading, avoided volunteering, or remained passive during reading activities despite their desire to improve.

The findings also indicated that reading anxiety developed from the interaction of personal insecurity and the social conditions surrounding reading. Engler and Westphal (2024) reported that autonomy-supportive learning environments helped sustain intrinsic reading motivation, while van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023) found that learners benefited from interventions that promoted competence, autonomy, interest, and positive social interaction. These findings suggested that participants required reading environments where mistakes were treated as part of learning and where learners could practice without

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humiliation. Thus, reducing reading anxiety required more than improving decoding and comprehension skills. It also required supportive teacher feedback, respectful peer behavior, appropriately challenging materials, and gradual opportunities for oral reading that could rebuild confidence and lessen fear of judgment.

The emotional and behavioral symptoms described, such as sweating, avoidance, stammering, and forgetting previously learned words, are supported by Barnes et al. (2024), who wrote that anxiety can manifest both psychologically and physically. This reinforces the idea that reading anxiety is not merely a mental block but a broader learning impediment.

These students' experiences also align strongly with Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, a component of his Second Language Acquisition Theory. Krashen (1982) argued that learners' emotional states significantly impact language acquisition. When the affective filter is high, due to anxiety, fear, or low self-confidence, language input cannot be processed effectively. In these cases, fear of judgment was a barrier, preventing effective reading engagement and vocabulary acquisition.

In conclusion, this study affirms that reading anxiety and fear of judgment are deeply embedded emotional experiences among successful readers. Individual skills, classroom dynamics, social interactions, and personal histories of ridicule or failure influence these emotions. Through the lens of Krashen's theory and supporting literature, it becomes evident that effective reading interventions must address learners' emotional environment as much as their cognitive and instructional needs.

Emerging Theme 2: Inadequate Reading Skills and Vocabulary Deficits

The participants' experiences revealed that inadequate word recognition, limited vocabulary, and weak reading fluency hindered their ability to understand texts. NJ and CJ struggled to recognize even simple words automatically, resulting in slow, effortful reading. This finding corresponded with Nilsson, Danielsson, Elwér, Messer, Henry, and Samuelsson (2021), who showed that successful comprehension depended on the combined development of accurate word recognition and language comprehension. When readers devoted excessive attention to decoding individual words, fewer cognitive resources remained to connect ideas and construct meaning. The participants' labored reading therefore reflected weaknesses at the word level that directly affected their overall comprehension.

Vocabulary deficits also emerged as a major source of difficulty among the participants. Li and Gan (2022) found that vocabulary knowledge strongly predicted reading comprehension because readers needed sufficient word knowledge to interpret sentences, infer meanings, and understand relationships across a text. In the cases of DR and RD, difficulty remembering and pronouncing words suggested limited familiarity with sound-symbol relationships and inadequate exposure to English vocabulary. Their inability to retrieve words quickly interrupted reading flow and reduced comprehension.

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Similarly, Villanueva (2022) found that more proficient readers used contextual clues, inferencing, and metacognitive strategies more consistently than less proficient readers. The participants' limited vocabulary restricted their capacity to apply these strategies effectively because they often lacked the linguistic knowledge needed to interpret unfamiliar words.

RZ's reliance on Filipino translation demonstrated how first-language knowledge supported comprehension when English vocabulary remained insufficient. Bernardo and Mante-Estacio (2023) found that Filipino readers benefited from strategies such as summarizing, evaluating information, and using prior knowledge to understand difficult texts.

In RZ's case, translation allowed him to connect unfamiliar English words with known Filipino meanings, which partly explained his comparatively better performance. However, frequent dependence on translation also slowed reading and prevented the development of automatic English word recognition. The findings therefore indicated that bilingual resources served as useful comprehension supports, but learners still required systematic vocabulary instruction, repeated exposure to words, pronunciation practice, and guided reading activities to strengthen fluency and independent comprehension.

These observations align with Scarborough's Reading Rope Model (2001), which describes skilled reading as integrating two strands: language comprehension and word recognition. The word recognition strand includes phonological awareness, decoding, and sight word recognition—all of which were underdeveloped in the participants. The cases show that the breakdown occurred mainly in this strand, causing weak reading performance.

This study affirms that inadequate reading skills and vocabulary deficits severely hinder reading development in successful learners. The differences in vocabulary range, decoding ability, and L1 reliance among the five cases highlight the complexity of reading challenges. Supported by Scarborough's framework and validated by empirical studies, these findings suggest early and intensive instruction in phonics, sight words, and vocabulary development, especially for students with historically limited exposure to print and literacy-rich environments.

Emerging Theme 3: Lack of Literacy Support at Home

The experiences of four of the five participants showed that limited literacy support at home reduced their opportunities to practice reading, expand vocabulary, and strengthen comprehension. In the cases of CJ and DR, household responsibilities and the absence of adult supervision often took priority over reading activities. This finding was consistent with Magsalin (2023), who found that learners' reading skills were associated with the frequency, purpose, and type of materials they read. Because the participants had few opportunities to engage with varied texts outside school, their reading development depended largely on classroom instruction.

The findings also suggested that the home environment influenced learners' motivation and attitudes toward reading. Moneba and Lovitos (2024) found that positive reading attitudes and learning motivation predicted reading comprehension among Filipino learners. However, the participants received limited encouragement, guidance, or reinforcement from family members,

which made reading appear less important than daily household obligations. Guia, Juliane, and Canoy (2024) similarly reported that motivated learners invested more effort, sustained attention, and persisted in difficult reading tasks. In the present cases, the lack of support at home may have weakened this motivation because the participants had few people to model reading, help with difficult words, or recognize their progress.

Moreover, Sancada (2022) found that parental involvement, especially in rural and Indigenous communities, remains a challenge because parents have low literacy levels, lack time, or have limited understanding of their role in literacy development. NJ's case, where digital distractions replaced reading time, mirrors findings by Pido and Sujitno (2022), who observed that unregulated mobile technology can severely hamper students' interest and time allocation for academic reading.

RZ's experience, where a grandmother actively participated in writing and reading sessions, highlights the benefits of intergenerational learning. According to Serpell et al. (2006), family literacy practices particularly those involving elders can foster early reading interest, boost motivation, and develop foundational literacy skills in culturally responsive ways. RZ's slightly stronger vocabulary and confidence in reading may be partly attributed to this home-based support system.

This theme aligns closely with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that learning is fundamentally a social process that occurs within cultural contexts and is mediated by tools and interaction with more knowledgeable others (MKOs). In this view, the absence of an MKO, a parent, sibling, or caregiver at home significantly impairs the scaffolding process necessary for literacy growth. For CJ, DR, NJ, and RD, the lack of such home-based mediators contributed to a slower and more frustrating reading development.

In summary, the cases demonstrate that a home environment lacking in literacy support whether due to chores, distractions, or absence of adult guidance negatively affects a learner's ability to develop reading skills. These findings are consistent with local and international studies and are theoretically anchored in sociocultural learning perspectives. To bridge this gap, schools must consider community-based literacy programs and parent education strategies that help caregivers become active facilitators of reading, even with limited formal education.

Emerging Theme 4: Peer, Teacher, and Family Intervention as Remedial Support

The participants' experiences showed that peer support contributed to the development of reading fluency, decoding skills, and confidence. CJ, NJ, and RD benefited from reading aloud with classmates who provided corrections and encouragement when they encountered unfamiliar words. This finding was consistent with Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek, and Winberg (2022), who found that students became more motivated to read when classroom practices included meaningful interaction, appropriate support, and opportunities to engage with others. Similarly, van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023) reported that positive social interaction strengthened reading motivation and participation. In the present cases, peer-assisted

reading reduced the pressure of working alone and allowed the learners to practice in a more relatable and supportive environment.

Teacher intervention also played an important role in the participants' reading improvement. NJ's experience demonstrated how targeted remediation sessions, guided oral reading, and immediate corrective feedback helped address specific difficulties in word recognition and fluency. This finding aligned with Mežek, McGrath, Negretti, and Berggren (2022), who explained that instructional scaffolding and feedback supported learners' self-regulation and academic reading development. Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024) likewise found that Filipino teachers used guided reading, vocabulary instruction, differentiated tasks, and peer-assisted activities to address reading gaps.

Family support further reinforced the reading skills developed in school, particularly in the cases of RZ and DR. Their family members modeled correct reading, helped them pronounce difficult words, and encouraged them to practice at home. Moneba and Lovitos (2024) found that positive reading attitudes and learning motivation predicted reading comprehension among Filipino learners, which suggested that encouragement from family members helped sustain learners' willingness to read. Guia, Juliane, and Canoy (2024) also reported that motivated learners exerted greater effort and persisted in challenging reading activities. Taken together, the findings indicated that peer, teacher, and family interventions provided complementary forms of remedial support. Peers offered encouragement and shared practice, teachers delivered systematic instruction, and families ensured continued reinforcement beyond the classroom.

This theme strongly aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, particularly his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs most effectively when a child engages in tasks just beyond their current ability but within reach through the assistance of a more knowledgeable other. All five participants operated within this zone, with classmates, teachers, and family members acting as MKOs who scaffolded their learning through modeling, correction, and guided reading practice.

The findings affirm that remedial support from peers, teachers, and family can transform reading difficulties into progress through consistent feedback, modeling, and encouragement. These interpersonal interventions bridge gaps in decoding and fluency and help learners regain confidence. Framed by Vygotsky's theory and supported by empirical studies, this theme demonstrates the importance of social interaction in overcoming academic challenges in reading.

Emerging Theme 5: Aspirations to Help Others

RD's aspiration to help other struggling readers reflected the development of self-regulation, confidence, and a stronger sense of purpose. His decision to read daily, overcome embarrassment, and improve his skills showed that he had begun to take greater responsibility for his own learning. This finding aligned with Qi (2021), who found that successful readers demonstrated self-regulated behaviors through planning, monitoring, persistence, and adjustment of strategies. Ferraz and Santos (2021) likewise explained that motivated readers managed their

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effort, evaluated their performance, and remained committed to their reading goals. In RD's case, his personal difficulties became a source of motivation rather than a reason for continued avoidance.

RD's intention to assist others also indicated social and emotional growth beyond the development of technical reading skills. His experiences allowed him to understand the struggles of other learners and recognize the importance of encouragement, patience, and shared support. Van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023) found that positive social interaction strengthened learners' motivation and engagement in reading. Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek, and Winberg (2022) similarly reported that learners valued reading environments that offered meaningful interaction, appropriate support, and opportunities to participate with others. These findings suggested that RD's transformation from an anxious reader into a potential source of support reflected increased empathy, self-awareness, and willingness to participate in a collaborative reading environment.

Although RD was the only participant who explicitly expressed an aspiration to help others, his experience suggested the potential value of peer-assisted reading activities for former struggling readers. Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024) found that peer-assisted learning, guided reading, and differentiated instruction helped Filipino learners address reading gaps. Guia, Juliane, and Canoy (2024) also reported that motivated learners exerted greater effort and persisted in difficult reading tasks. RD's desire to guide other readers could therefore reinforce his own confidence and comprehension while providing relatable support to peers who experienced similar difficulties. His experience supported the development of classroom interventions that allowed improving readers to become reading partners, peer mentors, or learning facilitators under appropriate teacher supervision. This theme resonates with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which posits that people learn through observing others, imitating behaviors, and eventually modeling those behaviors for others. RD's growth from receiving support to aspiring to become a support figure exemplifies the modeling process. He observed how others guided him, his classmate and his sister, and now seeks to reproduce that role. According to Bandura, such modeling improves learning and fosters internal motivation and leadership skills.

In summary, RD's aspiration to help others as a former struggling reader reflects a valuable but often underexplored trajectory of academic recovery: the transition from learner to leader. Though not shared by the other cases, RD's experience shows that, with the right environment, students can move beyond self-improvement to peer empowerment. Grounded in Bandura's theory and supported by social-emotional learning literature, this finding advocates for school-based initiatives that empower formerly struggling readers to become peer mentors, fostering inclusive and reciprocal learning communities.

Challenges Encountered by Grade 7 Successful Readers

The challenges experienced by the successful readers highlight a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors affecting literacy development. Difficulties in word

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recognition, low self-esteem, and emotional distress emerged as key barriers, often intensified by the absence of early and consistent support systems. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience through self-initiated strategies and drew motivation from social influences such as peers, teachers, and family members. The findings are underpinned by Social Constructivism, Engagement Theory, and the Theory of Support System, emphasizing the importance of scaffolding, meaningful engagement, and collaborative support. Overall, the study affirms the need for holistic, early, and sustained interventions that address both the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading to promote long-term literacy success.

Emerging Theme 1 - Difficulty with Word Recognition and Reading Materials

The participants' recurring difficulty with word recognition indicated weaknesses in decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and reading automaticity. DR and NJ frequently struggled with unfamiliar and specialized words, which interrupted their reading flow and limited their understanding of the materials. This finding aligned with Nilsson, Danielsson, Elwér, Messer, Henry, and Samuelsson (2021), who found that successful reading comprehension depended on the combined development of accurate word recognition and language comprehension. When learners could not identify words quickly and correctly, they devoted more attention to decoding and had fewer cognitive resources available for constructing meaning from the text.

The participants' difficulty also reflected limited vocabulary exposure and insufficient familiarity with varied reading materials. Li and Gan (2022) reported that vocabulary knowledge strongly predicted reading comprehension because readers needed adequate word knowledge to connect ideas across sentences and interpret the overall meaning of a passage. Similarly, Magsalin (2023) found that learners' reading skills were associated with the frequency, purpose, and variety of materials they read. In the present study, limited exposure to academic and subject-specific vocabulary appeared to have reduced the participants' ability to recognize words automatically, which often caused them to pause, mispronounce, or skip difficult terms.

The findings further suggested that struggling readers required structured, repeated, and guided practice with appropriate reading materials. Mežek, McGrath, Negretti, and Berggren (2022) explained that instructional scaffolding and feedback supported learners in developing more effective reading strategies and greater independence. Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024) likewise identified guided reading, vocabulary instruction, differentiated activities, and contextualized texts as effective approaches for addressing reading gaps among Filipino learners. Therefore, improving word recognition required regular exposure to meaningful texts, explicit vocabulary instruction, corrective feedback, and reading materials suited to the learners' current ability levels.

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, learning is a socially mediated activity where the presence of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) facilitates the learner's development. In this case, the teacher and classmates acted as MKOs through scaffolding strategies such as modeling, feedback, and gradual release of responsibility, which helped the participants gain confidence and fluency in reading.

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Additionally, the difficulties reported align with the Theory of Support System, which emphasizes the importance of consistent emotional and instructional backing from teachers and peers. CJ and RD, for example, benefited from both formal remediation and informal peer tutoring, underscoring the need for early, targeted interventions that address cognitive and affective barriers to reading.

Therefore, addressing difficulties in word recognition requires a multifaceted approach. Educators must implement structured reading interventions, cultivate a supportive peer environment, and integrate reading practice across content areas. Future interventions can draw from these findings to improve reading outcomes by embedding the principles of Social Constructivism and support systems within school programs (Ma & Zhao, 2025; Porter, 2010).

Emerging Theme 2 - Low Self-esteem and Emotional Distress

The participants' experiences showed that reading difficulties negatively affected their self-esteem, confidence, and emotional well-being. All participants described feelings of embarrassment, fear, and shame when they encountered difficult reading tasks, especially when they were expected to read in front of others. This finding aligned with Engler and Westphal (2024), who found that learners' reading motivation was influenced by how much their learning environment supported autonomy and competence. When readers repeatedly experienced failure or public correction, they appeared more likely to perceive themselves as incapable readers, which weakened their willingness to participate and persist.

The emotional distress reported by the participants also appeared to interfere with their ability to use effective reading strategies. Heyne, Gnambs, Lockl, and Neuenhaus (2023) established that reading motivation, metacognitive knowledge, and strategy awareness contributed to reading literacy development. However, the participants' anxiety and low self-confidence often redirected their attention from understanding the text toward avoiding mistakes and negative reactions. Li and Gan (2022) likewise found that motivation and self-regulated strategy Use were important predictors of reading comprehension. These findings suggest that emotional discomfort can limit learners' capacity to monitor their understanding, apply appropriate strategies, and stay focused on the reading task.

NJ's tendency to avoid long or unfamiliar words illustrated how avoidance became a coping response to possible embarrassment. Although skipping difficult words temporarily protected the learner from public mistakes, it reduced opportunities to develop decoding accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency. Van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023) found that reading motivation improved when learners experienced competence, autonomy, interest, and supportive social interaction. Therefore, addressing the participants' reading difficulties required both academic and emotional support. Teachers needed to provide constructive feedback, manageable reading tasks, private or small-group practice, and a classroom environment where mistakes were treated as a normal part of literacy development.

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Using Social Constructivism as a lens, we understand that social interaction interlinks and shapes emotional and cognitive development. Supportive environments that include peer modeling, teacher encouragement, and low-stakes reading opportunities can significantly alleviate the emotional burdens of struggling readers (Vygotsky, 1978; McLeod, 2025). In this study, the presence or absence of such supportive social interactions contributed to learners' self-esteem in reading.

Therefore, interventions must recognize and address the emotional dimensions of reading difficulties. Emotional scaffolding should complement cognitive strategies through praise, encouragement, and a safe space for errors. This can boost learners' confidence, reduce anxiety, and increase their willingness to engage with texts, fostering positive reading identities (Ma & Zhao, 2025).

Emerging Theme 3 - Lack of Early and Consistent Support Systems

The participants' narratives revealed that the absence of early identification and structured intervention contributed to the persistence of their reading difficulties. CJ, NJ, and DR experienced problems with word recognition, fluency, and comprehension for several years before receiving appropriate support. This finding aligned with Nilsson, Danielsson, Elwér, Messer, Henry, and Samuelsson (2021), who established that successful reading comprehension depended on the coordinated development of word recognition and language comprehension. When these weaknesses were not identified and addressed in the early grades, learners had fewer opportunities to develop the foundational skills needed for later academic reading.

The findings also showed that families often served as compensatory support systems when formal school-based interventions were limited or delayed. Some participants relied on relatives to help them pronounce unfamiliar words, practice oral reading, and complete literacy-related tasks at home. Moneba and Lovitos (2024) found that positive reading attitudes and learning motivation contributed to reading comprehension among Filipino learners, suggesting that encouragement and practice at home supported literacy development. However, relying on family assistance alone could produce unequal outcomes because not all households had the time, materials, literacy competence, or confidence to provide effective reading support.

The participants' experiences further suggested that effective reading development required coordinated cognitive, emotional, and social support from teachers, peers, and families. Mežek, McGrath, Negretti, and Berggren (2022) explained that instructional scaffolding and feedback strengthened learners' self-regulation and academic reading performance. Similarly, van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023) found that competence, autonomy, and positive social interaction supported reading motivation. In the present cases, however, many learners depended on informal peer and family assistance because school interventions were inconsistent or introduced only after reading difficulties had become more pronounced. This pattern emphasized that support systems became more effective when they were continuous, coordinated, and responsive to the learner's specific academic and emotional needs.

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RD's experience showed that structured intervention could still produce meaningful improvement even when it began later. The remediation initiative introduced in Grade 5 provided him with guided practice, corrective feedback, and opportunities to improve his reading skills. This finding corresponded with Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024), who reported that guided reading, differentiated instruction, vocabulary development, peer-assisted activities, and contextualized materials helped address reading gaps among Filipino learners. Schools therefore needed to establish proactive assessment procedures, structured remediation programs, continuous progress monitoring, and stronger collaboration with families to prevent the academic and emotional consequences of delayed literacy support.

Emerging Theme 4 - Self-Initiated Strategies and Adaptive Efforts

Participants' self-initiated strategies reflected learner autonomy, persistence, and resilience in addressing their reading difficulties. CJ, NJ, and DR practiced reading beyond regular class hours, repeated difficult words, and sought opportunities to improve their fluency and accuracy. This finding aligned with Qi (2021), who found that successful readers demonstrated self-regulated behaviors through planning, monitoring, persistence, and strategy adjustment. Ferraz and Santos (2021) likewise explained that motivated readers managed their effort and evaluated their performance as they worked toward their reading goals. The participants' routines therefore showed that consistent personal effort helped compensate for earlier gaps in reading support.

RZ's use of movies and subtitled media demonstrated how incidental exposure supported vocabulary recognition and reading development. His engagement with subtitles allowed him to associate spoken language with printed words and infer meaning from context. This finding corresponded with Chang, Wang, Liu, Feng, and Zhang (2023), who found that successful digital readers purposefully used technology to access and process information. Habók, Oo, and Magyar (2024) also reported that effective readers adjusted their strategies, reread difficult sections, and used contextual information to understand unfamiliar content. RZ's experience suggested that personally meaningful multimedia resources could serve as adaptive learning tools when formal reading materials felt less engaging or accessible.

The participants' adaptive efforts also showed the importance of meaningful and authentic reading experiences. Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek, and Winberg (2022) found that learners became more motivated when reading activities involved interesting texts, appropriate levels of difficulty, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Similarly, Engler and Westphal (2024) established that autonomy-supportive environments strengthened intrinsic reading motivation. In the present cases, learners invested greater cognitive and emotional effort when they selected materials connected to their interests or used strategies, they found manageable.

DR and RD further developed their reading skills by observing and imitating teachers, classmates, and more capable readers. This practice reflected the value of social scaffolding in supporting independent learning. Mežek, McGrath, Negretti, and Berggren (2022) explained that

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instructional feedback and scaffolding strengthened self-regulation and academic reading development. Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024) likewise found that guided reading, peer-assisted activities, differentiated instruction, and contextualized materials helped Filipino learners address reading gaps.

Overall, the findings showed that learners could adapt and progress when they combined personal initiative with minimal but responsive support from teachers and peers. Schools should therefore recognize self-initiated strategies and strengthen them through metacognitive instruction, learner choice, regular feedback, and access to varied reading resources.

Emerging Theme 5 - Social Influence and Motivation from Others

The participants' experiences showed that social influence played a significant role in strengthening their motivation to read. CJ and DR became more willing to practice because their classmates and family members encouraged them, monitored their progress, and acknowledged their efforts. This finding aligned with van der Sande, van Steensel, Fikrat-Wevers, and Arends (2023), who found that positive social interaction supported reading motivation and engagement. Tegmark, Alatalo, Vinterek, and Winberg (2022) likewise reported that learners responded more positively to reading when they experienced encouragement, meaningful interaction, and supportive participation.

Parental involvement was particularly evident in DR and RD's experiences. Their parents checked assignments, reminded them to practice, and provided emotional reinforcement when reading tasks became difficult. Moneba and Lovitos (2024) found that positive reading attitudes and learning motivation contributed to reading comprehension among Filipino learners. Guia, Juliane, and Canoy (2024) similarly reported that motivated learners invested more effort and persisted longer in challenging reading activities. In the present cases, parental monitoring created a sense of accountability, while encouragement helped the learners continue despite embarrassment, frustration, and previous reading failures.

Teachers and peers also served as important sources of instructional and emotional scaffolding. Mežek, McGrath, Negretti, and Berggren (2022) explained that feedback and guided support strengthened learners' self-regulation and academic reading performance. Rominimbang, Rominimbang, and Barrera (2024) further found that guided reading, peer-assisted activities, differentiated instruction, and vocabulary development helped Filipino learners address reading gaps. The participants' experiences reflected this social learning process because they observed more capable readers, accepted corrections, and modelled the reading practices of teachers and classmates.

The findings therefore emphasized the importance of an integrated support network composed of families, peers, and teachers. Engler and Westphal (2024) found that autonomy-supportive learning environments helped sustain intrinsic reading motivation, while Qi (2021) showed that successful readers developed persistence and self-regulation through purposeful engagement with reading tasks. In the present study, external encouragement appeared to support

the gradual development of internal motivation. These coordinated forms of support could reduce the emotional effects of reading failure and encourage learners to persist until they developed greater confidence and independence.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the experiences of Grade 7 successful readers were emotionally and cognitively challenging, marked by fear, shame, and social influence. All participants recalled anxiety when reading aloud and feelings of embarrassment tied to past ridicule or failure. Despite this, they showed resilience, supported by peers, teachers, and family.

The challenges they faced included poor word recognition, limited vocabulary, and weak reading fluency, compounded by minimal early literacy support. Many also faced external obstacles such as household duties and a lack of guidance. While school interventions were often late, learners used self-help strategies and peer support to improve. However, all five participants were positively influenced by their family, classmates, and teachers. These influences offered them emotional motivation and practical guidance.

Lastly, across five cases, striking similarities emerged in the form of shared emotional distress, foundational reading deficits, and the eventual reliance on social support to improve. However, differences were also notable, particularly in the type and timing of support received, degree of self-motivation, and the learners' outlook on helping others. These similarities and differences highlight the importance of individualized interventions and systemic reforms that address both the technical aspects of reading and the emotional and social dimensions of literacy development.

Recommendations

Based on the insights drawn from the students' experiences and challenges, here are a few recommendations that might help support struggling readers more effectively:

1. Teachers are encouraged to foster emotionally supportive classrooms by using low-stakes reading activities, positive reinforcement, and social-emotional learning strategies. Training shall be provided to help teachers recognize signs of reading anxiety and build an environment where mistakes are seen as part of learning.
2. Classroom teachers in early grades might also consider conducting regular literacy screenings and providing targeted reading interventions. Integrating simple, engaging activities that strengthen decoding, vocabulary, and fluency within daily lessons can help address foundational gaps before they escalate.
3. Classrooms might consider peer-to-peer reading support through structured buddy systems or reading groups. Teachers can also embed metacognitive strategies by guiding students to set reading goals, track their progress, and reflect on their learning to build independence and motivation.

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