

Breaking the Barriers: Exploring the Deterrents of Quality Elementary Education

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive- qualitative research was conducted with the aim of identifying the key barriers that hinder learners from accessing and attaining effective education. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants from public elementary schools located in a geographically challenged area. Data were gathered through interviews and were analyzed through thematic analysis to extract recurring patterns and significant insights. Findings revealed that deterrents to quality elementary education include textbook shortage, low Socio-economic Status (SES), low parental education, learners' negative attitude towards studies, and school location issues. Actions taken to overcome such deterrents include resorting to digital mobilization, engaging in sideline jobs, creating engaging learning experiences, building strong support systems, engaging in self-care practices, and practicing positive thinking, resourcefulness, adaptability, and resilience. The study concludes that these deterrents are interconnected and require comprehensive, multi- stakeholder interventions to promote inclusive and quality education. Hence, a Strategic Intervention Program is proposed to mitigate, if not eradicate, the identified deterrents and promote a more inclusive, equitable, and high-quality public elementary education system.

Keywords: Challenges, textbook shortage, socio- economic status, parental education, student behavior, school accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Elementary education serves as the cornerstone of a nation's development, shaping the cognitive, emotional and social foundation of future generations. Despite global commitments to universal education, significant disparities in the quality and accessibility of elementary schooling persist. In many regions, children face a multitude of obstacles that hinder their ability to receive a consistent and enriching educational experience.

“Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of societal progress”, is widely grounded in international policy frameworks, particularly those of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Quality elementary education, in particular, lays the foundation for future learning and success, shaping individuals' cognitive abilities, social-emotional development, and overall well- being. However, achieving universal access to quality education remains significant challenge globally, and the Philippines is no exception. In many communities, various barriers impede the delivery of effective and equitable education (UNESCO, 2021).

Quality education is a matter of great concern and what quality means in education is a subject of intense debate. UNESCO (2021) conceptualized quality education as, learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. Making quality school education accessible to every child in the world is a big challenge as the school system faces a huge shortage of trained teachers, a lack of basic infrastructure, school dropouts, and the socio-economic condition of the student's parents. Such is the reason for the undesirable literacy level. The non-availability of quality Early Childhood Care and Education is a matter of great concern in the country as it has a long-term impact on children with 78 % of 3–4-year-old do not attend daycare, and 28% of 5-year-old are not enrolled in kindergarten (PSA, 2022). Teachers and head teachers are the most

important pillar of the school and need to be strengthened through quality capacity-building training. Hence, making quality education accessible to every child will depend on how the policy is implemented in reality. This study is grounded in primary qualitative data obtained through interviews designed to capture the lived experiences of participants. The respondents were purposively selected from three key stakeholder groups, namely four learners, four parents, and four teachers, to ensure a range of perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

While the Philippine government has implemented various initiatives to improve education, disparities persist across different regions and communities. Notably, rural areas such as Balasan, Iloilo, often experience greater challenges due to factors such as geographical isolation, limited resources, family problems, and socioeconomic inequalities. These challenges manifest in various ways, impacting learners, teachers, and parents alike. For instance, limited access to quality learning materials, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of trained teachers can significantly hinder learner learning outcomes. One learner stated, “Our teacher does not allow us to bring our book at home so we do not have any reference for our assignments.” Furthermore, socio-economic factors, such as poverty and limited parental involvement, can create additional barriers to educational success (UNESCO, 2022). Understanding the specific deterrents to quality elementary education is crucial for developing targeted interventions and improving educational outcomes.

This study aimed to shed light on the complexities of these challenges, exploring the interrelationship between different factors and their impact on learners, teachers, and parents within the context of a local community. The findings would provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders to design and implement effective strategies to overcome these barriers and promote quality elementary education in the municipality that can benefit the local community as they strive against the education crises of the country.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach, a qualitative research method that prioritizes understanding how individuals construct meaning from their lives. Narrative inquiry focuses on the collection and analysis of personal stories, recognizing that meaning is constructed over time by connecting past experiences to current and future understandings. This methodology emphasizes the participant’s perspective by utilizing methods designed to capture the nuances of individual experiences and interpretations. This approach aligns with the study’s aim to explore the lived experiences and narratives of learners, parents, and teachers, reflecting the deterrents to quality elementary education and the ways in which they navigate these challenges. This is consistent with narrative inquiry, which emphasizes understanding human experiences through the stories people tell about their lives (Clandinin, D. Jean & F. Michael Connelly, 2000).

The study was conducted in the municipality of Balasan, Iloilo, Philippines, a second-class municipality composed of 11 public elementary schools and two national high schools. Based on data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), Balasan recorded a poverty incidence of 24.21% in 2021, which has implications for educational access and quality due to prevailing socio-economic conditions.

Participants were drawn from selected barangays and public elementary schools within the municipality. The study involved learners from Grades 4 to 6 (aged 10–12), their parents, and teachers currently employed in

public elementary schools. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants with direct and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

Specifically, four learners, four parents, and four teachers were included to ensure representation of key stakeholders in the educational process. This approach allowed for the triangulation of perspectives on systemic and contextual challenges in elementary education. The interview process was completed over five days to ensure the full participation of all respondents and the thorough collection of qualitative data. The sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, as recurring themes emerged with no new significant insights

during the interviews.

To ensure sampling representation and minimize bias, inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly employed during participant selection. This systematic approach served to identify individuals suitable for the study while excluding those who did not meet the established requirements.

Data collection utilized a researcher-made interview schedule following a systematic self-reporting procedure to gather individual responses. The instrument underwent face and content validation by members of the advisory committee to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. All corrections and suggestions from the advisory and examining committee members were carefully incorporated into the final version of the interview guide, consistent with established qualitative research practices emphasizing expert validation for instrument credibility (John W. Creswell, 2013).

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis within a narrative inquiry framework. As defined by Braun et al. (2016), thematic analysis is a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. This approach is particularly appropriate for narrative inquiry, as it enables the interpretation of participants' lived experiences through their stories. The analysis began with immersion in the data, followed by the inductive generation of initial codes. These codes were then organized into potential themes based on shared meanings and relationships, followed by a rigorous process of reviewing and refining the themes. The final phase involved the development of a comprehensive narrative report presenting the findings of the analysis.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, the study employed both peer debriefing and member checking as validation strategies. These approaches are widely recognized in qualitative research as essential techniques for enhancing credibility and confirmability of findings (Yvonna S. Lincoln & Egon G. Guba, 1985). Member checking allowed participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations of their responses, while peer debriefing provided critical external review of the emerging themes and analysis.

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring voluntary participation, consistent with established qualitative research ethics guidelines (Creswell, 2013).

To address potential researcher bias, the study incorporated critical feedback from experienced qualitative researchers. This reflexive process aligns with the principle of reflexivity in qualitative inquiry, wherein researchers continuously examine their assumptions and interpretations to enhance the integrity of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such practices strengthened the rigor, depth, and trustworthiness of the overall findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study examined the lived experiences of learners, parents, and teachers, with particular attention to how systemic and contextual challenges hinder the quality of elementary education and how stakeholders employ various coping mechanisms in response to these difficulties. The findings revealed not only persistent barriers but also resourceful and adaptive responses underscored important implications for strategic educational interventions.

As expressed by Learner 2, "There are books in the library, but we are not allowed to borrow them." Similarly, a parent shared, "There are books that our children borrow from their teachers, but not all their subjects have the needed books." Teacher 2 also stated, "To be honest, we do not yet have sufficient books under the MATATAG Curriculum."

The results indicate that learners faced interconnected challenges, notably a lack of textbooks and learning materials. When resources are limited, both teaching and learning processes are adversely affected, leading teachers to adjust instructional methods and learners to rely on whatever materials are available. This situation negatively impacted academic performance and student engagement, as access to adequate learning resources is

strongly associated with improved learning outcomes (Eric A. Hanushek, 1997; Ludger Woessmann, 2007).

The socioeconomic condition of families contributed as another significant factor. Learners from low-income

households often faced challenges beyond the classroom, including limited access to school supplies, technology, and additional academic support. In contrast, those from more financially stable backgrounds generally had greater access to learning opportunities. This difference contributed to uneven learning outcomes and highlighted the role of economic conditions in shaping educational experiences.

Parents 1 and 2 shared their experiences as members of low-income families. They described the challenges of living with limited financial resources and the frequent difficulties they encountered in their daily lives. The following statements reflect their responses and perspectives:

“Money is a problem in doing my son’s outputs and in joining extra-curricular activities at a higher level,” Parent 1 stated. Parent 2 added, “We belong to a poor family, so sometimes I give my son an allowance, but it is not enough since it is only 10 pesos.”

Parental educational background influenced the learning process, as parents with limited formal education may face challenges in directly assisting with academic tasks. However, many still provide meaningful support through encouragement, guidance, and active involvement in their children’s schooling. These non-academic forms of support remain crucial in sustaining learners’ motivation, persistence, and positive attitudes toward learning. The result aligned with research showing that parental involvement - regardless of educational attainment - positively contributed to student motivation and academic engagement (Davis-Kean, 2005).

The stories shared by the parent-participants, as attested by the learner and teacher-participants revealed that most of them were undergraduates, with barely a few who finished high school, hence, they may not feel free with or capable of assisting their children with school work as confessed by Parent-Participant 2 in a statement: “I cannot help my children in making their assignments and projects because I do not know how to do it also”.

Results suggested that parental education is an important predictor of academic achievement. The result of the present study agreed with the previous studies, like Engin-Demir (2009), who found that parental education on children’s education has a powerful impact on their attainment and adjustment in education; and in relation to this, Brooks - Gunn, & Duncan (2000) stated that, the more a student is exposed to learning environment in the home, the better his/her academic achievement. Educated parents help their children to study hard. They help their children arrange time for studies and set up a study space, answering questions that are unclear to children during study.

Attitudes of the learners toward their studies significantly influenced their academic engagement. Some learners developed negative perceptions toward learning, often due to repeated academic difficulties or low self-confidence, resulting in reduced participation and lower performance. This is consistent with research showing that academic self-concept and motivation are strongly linked to achievement outcomes (Albert Bandura, 1997).

However, the findings also highlighted the crucial role of teachers in shaping learners' attitudes. A supportive and engaging classroom environment can improve learners’ motivation and encourage active participation, aligning with studies emphasizing that teacher support and positive classroom climate enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (John Hattie, 2009).

In responses to interview questions pertaining to the Learner-participants, the parents and teacher-participants shared that the learners seemed less focused on their studies and would rather spend their time at computer hubs. As confessed by Learner-Participant 1, stating: “Sometimes, I do not like to go to school because I have to study hard for a difficult examination”. Learner-Participant 2 also admitted: “I find it difficult to take an examination because I have to study hard”. Such statements indicated that the learners found studying hard and hated examinations.

Parents and Teacher-participants alike commented that the “learners are not so interested in their studies, they don’t like to study their lessons, they don’t like to take examinations because they are not studious and are not focused; instead, they would rather spend their time in computer shops.”

These results were supported by the findings of Wang and Degol (2014), who found that students’ behavioral patterns are crucial for positive educational outcomes. Likewise, Thompson (2015) posits that a student's attitude can affect his/her ability to learn as well as that of other students in a learning environment.

School location presents another layer of challenge. Learners in remote or underserved areas often face barriers such as long travel distances, limited infrastructure, and reduced access to educational resources. These conditions make it more difficult for learners to fully benefit from educational opportunities than for learners in more accessible locations.

School location can significantly impact the academic success of elementary pupils, particularly when considering factors like accessibility, resources, and community support. While proximity to school can ease daily commutes and potentially improve focus, studies indicate that students in certain locations may face challenges that affect their performance. In the story shared by the Learner-participant 1, he said that he “just walks from home to school.” Similarly, Parent-participant 1 mentioned that “their house is just a walking distance to school” as confirmed by Teacher -Participant 1 stating that “the school is accessible to all learners; it is just a walking distance from their house”. Learner-participant 2 added that “it is difficult to get to their house. It is difficult for him to go to school because they live in a far-flung and mountainous barangay”.

Despite these challenges, learners, parents, and teachers showed resilience by adapting to circumstances. Learners utilized available digital resources in the absence of textbooks. Teachers employed multimedia and interactive strategies to enhance instruction, demonstrating willingness to innovate in constrained environments.

Parents, particularly those facing financial difficulties, showed determination in supporting their children's education. This was aligned with Davis-Kean (2005) stating that parental expectations and involvement significantly influence children’s academic outcomes, often mitigating the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. They seek additional sources of income, borrow when necessary, and make personal sacrifices to meet educational needs. At the same time, they provide emotional support and encouragement, which remain crucial in helping learners stay motivated.

Learners adopted various coping strategies in response to academic and contextual challenges, relying on social support from peers, family members, and teachers, while some developed personal strategies such as self-discipline, time management, and stress regulation. In addressing challenges related to school location and accessibility, learners demonstrated adaptability by finding ways to continue attending school despite difficulties encountered. This aligned with research of Bandura, A. (1997), highlighting that social support systems and individual coping mechanisms play a significant role in helping students manage academic stress and persist in schooling.

The study demonstrated that stakeholders showed resourcefulness in responding to structural challenges. This active engagement is vital for designing interventions that not only address gaps but also amplify existing community strengths, reinforcing the central argument that resilience and collaboration drive improvement.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, the study emphasized the need for a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to improving educational quality. Efforts should prioritize strengthening resource provision, particularly in ensuring access to adequate learning materials and improved school infrastructure, as these are strongly associated with student achievement outcomes (Eric A. Hanushek & Ludger Woessmann, 2007). Addressing socioeconomic challenges through targeted support is also essential in promoting more equitable access to education, consistent with global evidence that poverty and inequality significantly influence educational participation and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

Enhancing parental engagement is another key area. Schools can play a significant role by providing guidance

and support to parents, helping them become more effective partners in their children's education, regardless of their educational background. This is supported by Epstein, J. (2001), who emphasizes that structured school-family partnerships significantly improve student achievement and engagement.

Teachers should also be supported through professional development opportunities that enable them to create

inclusive, engaging, and learner-centered classroom environments, which is consistent with evidence showing that teacher quality and continuous professional learning are key drivers of student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, L. 2017).

Addressing geographic disparities requires innovative and flexible solutions. Community-based learning spaces, alternative modes of instruction, and localized support systems can help expand educational opportunities for learners in remote areas, aligning with global education reports highlighting the importance of equitable access and flexible learning systems in reducing rural-urban learning gaps (UNESCO, 2020).

The Strategic Intervention Program centers on harnessing collaborative efforts and adaptive teaching practices to improve educational inclusion and equity. By directly targeting resource gaps, stakeholder engagement, and diverse learner needs, the program advances the study's main argument that sustained educational improvement relies on coordinated action and context-responsive strategies (UNESCO, 2020).

Based on the results of the study, several recommendations are considered. Government agencies and non-governmental organizations may expand support programs such as school feeding initiatives, distribution of learning materials, and financial assistance for families in need. Education policy makers may consider implementing systems that recognize not only academic achievement but also effort and improvement, thereby encouraging learners to remain engaged.

School heads may organize workshops to equip parents with practical ways to support their children's learning and establish partnerships with private organizations to offer scholarships and outreach programs. In response to challenges posed by distance and emergencies, schools may also consider establishing temporary or satellite learning spaces.

Teachers are encouraged to develop accessible learning materials that can be used even without internet connectivity, such as printed modules or pre-loaded digital resources. Local government units may also support these efforts by creating community-based learning hubs and mini-libraries that provide access to educational materials and mentorship opportunities.

Finally, future researchers are strongly encouraged to investigate additional factors influencing educational quality. By doing so, the evidence base for policy and practice will be continually enhanced, driving sustained improvement and meaningful progress in elementary education.

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