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# Response to intervention within a multi-tiered systems of support: a missing element in the literacy curricula, policies, and practices in the Philippines

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International assessments in reading appear to be a strong driver of educational efforts within nations who participate in these tests. While some countries debate the declaration of educational crises within their jurisdictions based on these assessments, the case of the Philippines' performance appear to be collectively recognized by Filipinos as existent, and therefore, needs to be boldly confronted. Correspondingly, educational reforms were made, but evidence-based decisions are yet to be seen. This brief argues that revisiting the research evidence is vital for policy and curricular changes so that factors are identified, and consequently, analyzed once progress monitoring shows how powerful or weak they are in influencing students' literacy outcomes. This brief ultimately recommends the potential for a response to intervention within multi-tiered systems of support.

## KEYWORDS

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), response to intervention (RtI), literacy policy, literacy curricula, literacy difficulties

## Introduction

The dismal performance of the Philippines in a series of international assessments in reading, mathematics, science, and more recently, in creative thinking, is a perennial reverberation of what appears to be an educational crisis in the country. While it is apparent that the country faces multiple challenges especially poverty (Bautista and Gatcho, 2022), decision-making at the societal level must ensure that equitable quality education and curricula are delivered to all learners regardless of their socioeconomic status, identities, and gender, among many other markers of diversity. It is understandable that educational changes cannot be expected overnight, but it should not prevent states from considering a more evidence-based approach to decision making, i.e., turning to the research base when planning, designing, implementing, monitoring, and improving educational policies and practices (Haw and King, 2023).

The Philippines' strong aspiration to solve this educational predicament has driven the government to make necessary changes to its curriculum, cutting back the number of learning competencies expected from the learners. While this is a cordial step in order to decongest the Philippines' basic education curricula, there is lack of evidence to prove that the changes were driven by a strong research base.

This is not to suggest, however, that the changes were haphazardly prepared. For it is highly unlikely that academic stakeholders were not involved or consulted in the decision-making processes. Nevertheless, involving academics with research degrees is one thing, but consulting the evidence as basis for curricular and policy changes is another. Scholars will have a range of intelligent opinions regarding educational reforms; more so with everyday folks who live the educational experiences day to day. However, it is certain that opinions will be diverse, or divergent, depending on the analytical lens upon which these opinions are founded.

Therefore, a strong call for transparency of the research evidence must be available to all stakeholders, and this research base must be evaluated in terms of their potency. This means that stakeholders must have access as to whether the research base of some educational practices, resources, and policies are strong, moderate, or weak. As a result, curriculum designers and policymakers are better informed where to invest their expertise, energies, and financial resources in relation to the elements that should be included within curricula and educational policies, in general, and literacy curricula and policies in particular.

This brief closely examines the current state of literacy classrooms apropos of the current policies in the Philippines, specifically the K-12 educational reform that commenced in 2013 under Republic Act 10533 (Republic of the Philippines, 2013; Alonzo, 2015), and the new MATATAG curriculum that is currently piloted under the Philippines' Department of Education (DepEd) Memorandum 54, series of 2023 (Department of Education, 2023). This is necessary to unpack the contexts relative to the pressing issues surrounding the dismal performance of the Philippines in relation to international assessments in reading. Although these international assessments provide a picture of reading, mathematics, and science performance of learners, this policy brief limits itself into the area of reading since this is foundational to the learning of science and mathematics, and other knowledge-based content areas across the curriculum.

## A general glimpse of Philippine classrooms

The Philippines, as a developing nation, faces a multitude of educational issues apart from poor performance in international large-scale assessments. Some issues that they face include, but not limited to, classroom shortages, poor teacher-student ratio (Galang et al., 2021), absence of teacher aides or incidence of heavy teacher workloads (Bongco and Ancho, 2019), teacher burnout (Orines et al., 2023), lack of instructional material availability and diversity (Waters and Vilches, 2008), and socioeconomic disparities (Bernardo, 2023), among many other challenges (Haw and King, 2023).

In 2004, as a response to the growing student populations vis-à-vis the insufficient number of classrooms, the country's DepEd released DepEd Order 62, s. 2004 (Department of Education, 2004), mandating the use of class shifts. The order specifies that a range of 15 to 65 students within a classroom is allowed, and that the average number of students within a classroom is 50. This strategy of class shifts means that when the number of students in classes exceeded 65, the school must divide their student population so

that some students will attend early morning to noon classes and the rest of the student population will attend afternoon to early evening classes. Four years after the mandate of this set-up, the order was then reiterated in another mandate, i.e., DepEd Order 54, s. 2008 (Department of Education, 2008), implying that the poor teacher-student ratio remained problematic.

Inferring from these situations, this means that teachers had to regularly deal with 65 students who may have had varied academic, cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral needs, not to mention the learners who may have been suspected to have specific and complex literacy learning difficulties. Although several bills have been proposed to cut the teacher-student ratio to 1:35, clearcut policy on this matter have remained idealized rather than actualized in all Philippine classrooms especially those situated in highly urbanized areas.

Teacher workload did not seem to diminish, as well, because the roles that teachers had to play did not end within their own instructional timeframes, but even extended to ancillary responsibilities. In fact, according to Bongco and Ancho (2019), teachers had to resort to bringing home tasks just to comply to extra ancillary demands, robbing themselves off their precious downtime to recover from work-related concerns.

Furthermore, the burden of teachers grew colossal when nations had to deal with a global health crisis in 2020, forcing teachers and students to resort to online teaching and learning. This meant that teachers had to accommodate both school and home roles within one space (i.e., their own homes), deal with work-related tasks in an undefined work hours, accommodate a more laborious workload due to preparation of instructional materials and assessment strategies consistent with online teaching and learning modalities, consider meeting diverse contexts and needs of learners due to socioeconomic disparities and other markers of individual differences, deal with the limitations of online teaching and learning especially when lessons were complex and needed to be delivered with elements which are simply absent in online contexts, and navigate instructional delivery despite the lack of support systems and the increased pressure of teacher accountability from educational leaders, among many others (Rivera, 2022).

It is also undeniable that in Philippine classrooms, there is simply no policy for the provision of teacher aides. Although the country's DepEd released DepEd Order 32, s. 2020 (Department of Education, 2020), which provides guidelines on the hiring of learning support aides (LSAs) to reinforce the implementation of their basic education learning continuity plan during the 2020 pandemic, this policy explicitly limited the engagement of the services of LSAs to 6 months, suggesting that the guideline was a band-aid measure rather than a long-term solution. Furthermore, it suggests that prior- and post-pandemic, LSAs were never considered as a fundamental element of school support structures despite the recognition that there is a poor teacher-student ratio in Philippine classrooms and there is a growing need to provide differentiated, needs-based instruction to learners.

Inferring from the earlier arguments within this section of the policy brief, a pattern seems to be apparent, i.e., the hyper-divided attention and energies expended by schoolteachers in order to respond to multiple demands from learner needs, and the top-down demands of educational policies, plus the heightened expectation of teacher accountability and productivity.

Assuming that the population of students remains constant over the years, teachers will still have to solely deal with about 35–65 students inside a classroom. Note that this range already reflects the idealized number of students based on proposed bills relative to teacher-student ratio per classroom and the policy mandated through DepEd Order 62, s. 2004 ([Department of Education, 2004](#)) stating the actual maximum number of students allowed per classroom. Given the country's dismal performance in the two succeeding PISA assessments and, consequently, the heightened call to improve quality education, teachers carry the greatest pressure in improving the poor educational and literacy achievements of students. Without systemic structural support to relieve this pressure off the back of teachers, their pedagogical efforts may proceed to reflect more of a compliance rather than a genuine strategy to improve educational and literacy outcomes in students.

## International benchmarks on literacy professionals

In 2010, the International Reading Association (IRA) recognized the need to institute standards relevant to the training and preparation of reading professionals—hence, they released their “Standards for Reading Professionals” ([International Reading Association, 2010](#)). In this document, IRA identified several roles of reading professionals, and these included: (a) reading specialists/literacy coaches, (b) pre-K and elementary classroom teachers, (c) middle and high school content teachers, (d) middle and high school reading teachers, (e) administrators, (f) teacher educators, and (g) educational support personnels—each having unique but related competencies.

After the organization's change of name to International Literacy Association (ILA) in 2015 due to the expanding landscape of literacy education and research, the organization updated the standards in 2017 so that it eventually became the “Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals” ([International Literacy Association, 2018](#)). In this updated document, the roles named in the earlier version expanded even more so that expectations from these roles are even more literacy-specific and specialized. What has previously been referred to as reading specialist/literacy coach in the earlier version is now referred to as specialized literacy professionals which included separate roles and expectations for the (a) reading/literacy specialist, (b) literacy coach, and (c) literacy coordinator/supervisor. Also, the new version eventually included another sector of literacy professionals so that intermediate classroom teachers now have a separate standard and expectations of the role.

Inferring from the iterations of the standards, the organization clearly advocated for the preparation of several specialized literacy professionals beyond the preparation of regular classroom teachers. Unfortunately, in Philippine classrooms, the regular classroom teacher bears all of these roles without specialized literacy training ([Gatcho, 2021](#)). It is also not uncommon to hear of teachers complain that school administrators even assign the development of remedial reading programs to them. While this may be seen as a practice with good intentions due to an appearance of trust to teachers' agency, the lack of a clear system in the development of

intervention programs will make it even more difficult to pinpoint which instructional and intervention practices are effective or not.

Therefore, intervention efforts either hit the literacy goal or miss it. In a developing country like the Philippines, a hit-or-miss system will deplete fundamental resources without any assurance that educational and literacy goals will be met. With the country's resounding dismal performance in literacy, it is imperative, therefore, to look at the research base before educational reforms can be made.

## Actionable recommendations and policy implications

International trends in literacy education appear to suggest a systematic, explicit instruction, and a knowledge-rich curricula. When one analyzes the curricular content of the Philippines, foundational literacy skills are explicitly specified in the curriculum. Lesson plans and instruction are also designed according to the competencies laid out in the curriculum. Typical of Philippine literacy classroom environments, teaching episodes and activities are mostly explicit and teacher-directed, with occasional learner-centered activities to encourage holistic development of children. Therefore, it is almost unfair to claim that the Philippines fell short in terms of curricular provisions and pedagogical expertise. What is missing, however, is multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)—something that other nations explicitly provide in their educational policies, structures, and practices but not for the Philippines.

Response to intervention (RtI) within MTSS has been happening internationally for a while now, and these measures were found to be potent in helping children make gains in reading ([Adlof, 2020](#); [de Haan, 2021](#); [Denton et al., 2013](#); [Field et al., 2019](#); [Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006](#); [Gillon et al., 2023](#); [Gillon et al., 2024](#); [Otaiba et al., 2014](#); [Stuckey et al., 2021](#)). However, in the Philippines, the pattern of reforms appears to target only the content of the curriculum, the recommended competencies, the number of competencies, or the number of years of schooling. The absence of peer-reviewed research on RtI and MTSS in the Philippines appears to be a testament to the off-tangent focus and strategies that the Philippine government has used or considered so far. Reform efforts remained to target distal rather than the proximal causes of literacy difficulties.

In literacy intervention literature, this kind of practice appears to be inefficient and ineffective because the proximal causes of literacy difficulties are not confronted head on ([Coltheart, 2015](#); [Ortiz et al., 2012](#)). This is not to suggest, however, that the distal causes of literacy difficulties should not be addressed. It only means that while the Philippine government seeks to improve conditions relative to the ecological (e.g., socioeconomic, home literacy environment, parental education, etc.) and psychological causes (e.g., social skills, behavior, etc.) of literacy difficulties, classroom instructional and intervention efforts must be focused on the cognitive causes of literacy difficulties (e.g., weakness in phonological, print, and vocabulary skills, etc.) because these causes are the aspects we can immediately target and the very variables we can hope to empirically measure and observe within a shorter period of time ([Coltheart, 2015](#)), especially when the goal of the intervention is to let students catch up with their peers.

RtI is a whole-school tiered system of instruction and intervention designed specifically to cater to the different needs of students (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006). This approach to instruction and intervention is characterized by having three tiers where Tier 1 refers to universal instruction where normal reading and writing task demands based on the recommended curriculum are targeted for and taught to all learners. Learners who need additional support are then placed to Tier 2 intervention as a supplement to Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 is characterized by more intensive and deliberate instruction targeting the proximal cause(s) of the learners' literacy difficulties. This is usually done in small groups with the support of highly trained learning support aides (LSAs). When learners in Tier 2 do not respond well from the intervention within this level, they are subsequently placed to Tier 3 intervention where a more personalized, custom-tailored support based on the proximal causes of the students' literacy difficulties are provided. Highly specialized literacy professionals like reading teachers, literacy specialists, and speech language therapists work together to respond to the specific needs of learners. Within all these tiers, frequent progress monitoring assessments at certain time points (e.g., after 10 or 20 weeks of instruction or intervention) are administered to check for skill improvements.

Regarding implementation, the approach commences with screening assessment using a reliable, valid, and standardized measure of reading comprehension. During the initial instructional weeks of the school year, students undergo this screening check so that learners with potential literacy difficulties may be identified apart from those who may be functioning at par with the literacy competencies identified in the recommended curriculum. Learners who fall below a stanine score of four are then placed in Tier 2 intervention in addition to the Tier 1 instruction. Further diagnostic assessment to identify the proximal causes of the students' literacy difficulties are carried out to inform the literacy professionals about their intervention targets.

Given the convincing evidence (e.g., Adlof, 2020; de Haan, 2021; Denton et al., 2013; Field et al., 2019; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006; Gillon et al., 2023; Gillon et al., 2024; Otaiba et al., 2014; Stuckey et al., 2021) that RtI within an MTSS framework works, this approach should, therefore, be a part of educational policy and practice in the Philippines. This will address the proximal causes of students' literacy difficulties, take the heavy burden off the back of regular classroom teachers, and at the same time, create jobs like teacher-aides, literacy specialists, and speech language therapists in school settings.

For a general operational guideline in relation to policy implementation, the following measures can be taken by the Philippine government to initiate their literacy reform efforts. First, the Philippine government, through its legislative bodies, crafts the necessary legislation to enact literacy reform efforts subject to the inputs of education stakeholders. Minimum provisions within the policy must include the following non-negotiables: (a) Creation of fulltime permanent positions (otherwise known in the Philippines as Plantilla items/positions) to be funded. These positions must include: (1) reading/literacy specialists, (2) literacy coaches, (3) literacy coordinators/supervisors, (4) reading teachers, (5) learning support aides, and (6) school-based speech-language therapists, and (b) Provision of reasonable and adequate funding for the full implementation of the literacy reform effort.

Next, once this policy becomes a law, the Department of Education crafts the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) consistent with a Response-to-Intervention within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (RTI/MTSS) framework and consistent with the strength of evidence to support a particular literacy intervention.

Then, after the IRR is approved and signed by the President, the country's Department of Budget and Management releases the funds to the Department of Education subject to applicable laws. The Department of Education then opens a call for proposals from Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) who will be providing services around professional learning and development (PLD) of the following literacy professionals:

- (a) reading/literacy specialists,
- (b) literacy coaches,
- (c) literacy coordinator/supervisors,
- (d) reading teachers,
- (e) learning support aides, and
- (f) school-based speech-language therapists.

In cases where a TEI does not have internal capabilities to provide PLD for speech-language pathology, this TEI can partner with other institutions who can provide the PLD within this domain. As soon as TEIs have submitted their proposals including their needed budget and overheads, the Department of Education then evaluates the proposals and chooses several TEIs as providers of PLD trainings subject to the conditions within an RTI/MTSS framework in literacy instruction and intervention and the conditions applicable by law. This means that the PLD providers must propose a well-structured plan around training literacy professionals as specified earlier.

Then, once the parties concerned have signed off a contract, the Department of Education then allocates funds for the TEIs to recruit and train literacy professionals and also allocates funds for itself relative to the recruitment of temporary substitute teachers who will be teaching while the main teacher attends the PLD training. This would mean that classes won't be disrupted, teacher's personal time-off during weekends are not taken away due to PLD, and jobs are created for the qualified substitute teachers. Teacher and student wellbeing is, therefore, maintained.

In terms of the content of the PLD via the micro-credentialing scheme, TEIs must: (a) deliver training around evidence-based instruction on phonological awareness, word recognition, morphological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension, among many other building blocks in literacy development, (b) deliver training on Tier 1 teaching (whole-class and small groups), (c) deliver training on Tier 2 intervention (small-group targeted support), and (d) deliver training on Tier 3 intervention (intensive individualized targeted support with a literacy specialist and a speech-language therapist).

Micro-credentials must be tailored to the specific role and responsibilities of the literacy professional (e.g., micro-credential for literacy specialists; micro-credential for literacy coaches, etc.). Within this micro-credential, the TEIs monitor the trainees until they satisfy needed competence to deliver evidence-based literacy instruction.

In the course of the micro-credentialing processes, the TEIs can gather data on learners' literacy performance and outcomes and

then evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention based on these outcomes. Data may be investigated using several study designs such as randomized controlled trials, or a mix of quantitative, qualitative, or other relevant methods that may inform future directions of the intervention and literacy reform efforts. The research procedures are, of course, subject to the review and approval of the institutional review boards (IRB) of the TEI providers of PLD training.

Ultimately, the TEIs must provide feedback around the results of the research to the Department of Education so that next steps may be planned and carried out to improve the literacy reforms, in general, and literacy intervention(s), in particular.

## Conclusion

Given the earlier premise that teachers in the Philippines usually handle 35–65 students, instructional differentiation based on learners' needs is almost impossible to administer, especially since there is an absence of specialized literacy professionals like teacher aides, literacy specialists, and speech language therapists. This means that there is less chance for teachers to target the proximal causes of literacy difficulties because there is virtually no opportunity to administer small group (Tier 2) or individualized (Tier 3) instruction. Instruction remains a whole-class, universal instruction (Tier 1). This implies that when there are students who deeply struggle even with the most basic foundational literacy skills, lessons remain universal and not specific to the literacy needs of students. This leads to Matthew effects in literacy – the rich get richer, the poor get poorer (Stanovich, 1986). In literacy, the less proficient a student is, the lesser the chance that this student succeeds because the very cognitive foundations of learning to read

are not addressed. Therefore, an educational policy that adopts this framework and funds this effort is highly imperative and critical.

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