

Illiterate Imagination: Why Some Learners Struggle Before They Even Start

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Abstract — Literacy struggles in early childhood are well-documented, yet most intervention research focuses on decoding deficits after school entry. Few studies examine the pre-cognitive, affective, and environmental roots that predispose children to fail before formal instruction begins. Objective: This study investigated Illiterate Imagination — the phenomenon wherein early reading resistance is rooted in pre-cognitive linguistic and affective deficits, rather than purely decoding inability — and its social implications for educational attainment, employment opportunity, and long-term well-being. Methodology: Using a qualitative phenomenological and narrative inquiry approach, this study gathered data from seven (7) participants: six (6) Grade 1–2 children (ages 6–8; 3 male, 3 female) exhibiting significant resistance to early reading instruction, and seven (7) of their parents/guardians, all from Piaz Elementary School, Division of Pangasinan II. Results: Findings revealed that struggling learners define reading as high-stakes public performance or a meaningless chore. Non-reading tasks exposed pre-existing linguistic deficits, including weak internal story schema and limited inferential capacity. Home environments were characterized by print scarcity and low parental modeling of reading for pleasure. Cumulatively, these failures produced a fixed non-reader identity that equates literacy with shame. Conclusion: Successful intervention requires a dual focus: rebuilding oral narrative skills before intensive decoding instruction, and dismantling fixed self-concepts by promoting low-stakes meaningful literacy engagement. Teachers should integrate storytelling and play into curricula; parents can support learning through bedtime reading routines and community book-sharing programs.

Keywords — *reading resistance, self-concept, narrative schema, home literacy environment, illiterate imagination, early childhood literacy, Philippines*

I. Introduction

The ability to read is widely recognized as the foundational skill upon which all academic learning is built. Yet for millions of children — particularly those from low-income and print-scarce communities — the struggle with literacy begins not in the classroom, but long before formal schooling starts. In the Philippines, early literacy remains a critical concern: data from the Department of Education (DepEd) consistently show that a significant number of learners in the primary grades lag in basic reading proficiency, affecting not only academic achievement but also long-term social and economic outcomes. Poor literacy is strongly associated with reduced employment opportunities, lower lifetime income, higher levels of psychological stress, and diminished health outcomes in adulthood (Holschuh, 2019; Nampila, 2021).

Most existing research on reading failure focuses on phonological awareness, decoding, and word recognition — skills that become measurable only after formal reading instruction has begun. However, this perspective misses an earlier, and arguably more consequential, layer of the problem: the pre-cognitive, affective, and environmental deficits that predispose a child to struggle even before the first reading lesson takes place. A child who enters school believing that reading is a dangerous public performance, who has never heard a multi-sentence story at home, and who already sees herself as "not a reader" is at a profound disadvantage that phonics instruction alone cannot address (Stewart & Swanson, 2024; Kroesch et al., 2024).

This paper introduces the concept of Illiterate Imagination to describe this cluster of pre-literacy deficits: a child's inability to mentally simulate, sequence, or narratively organize language — compounded by a home environment low in print exposure and a developing self-concept that rejects the reader identity. Rooted theoretically in Stanovich's (1986) Matthew Effect in Reading — where small early reading gaps widen exponentially over time — this study extends the model beyond decoding to encompass the imaginative and affective capacities that underpin all comprehension.

This gap in the literature is significant. While interventions such as mobile learning (Stockwell & Wang, 2024), construction kits in STEM (Fislake & Schumacher, 2024), and equity-centered assessments (Smith et al., 2023) address learners after failure emerges, very few studies examine how oral narrative development, print exposure, and identity formation interact before reading instruction begins — particularly in Filipino elementary contexts. The present study sought to fill this gap by investigating the conceptions of literacy, oral narrative capacities, home literacy environments, and literacy self-concept of young children in Pangasinan who are already resistant to reading at the start of schooling.

Understanding these pre-reading roots of literacy failure has direct practical implications. Teachers who recognize that a child's avoidance of reading stems from shame and fixed identity rather than laziness can reframe their instructional approach. Parents who understand the role of storytelling and print visibility at home can implement simple, low-cost strategies — such as a bedtime reading routine or a community book-sharing program — that meaningfully support their child's cognitive and affective readiness for literacy. This study contributes both theoretical insights into pre-literacy development and actionable recommendations for Filipino schools, families, and communities.

II. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design integrating phenomenological and narrative inquiry approaches. Phenomenology was used to describe the lived experiences of reluctant readers and their families, while narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to analyze the stories children told — both about reading and through oral storytelling — as data revealing

underlying cognitive and affective structures. This design was deemed most appropriate because the study's central aim was to understand the subjective meanings, feelings, and perceptions children and parents attach to literacy, which cannot be captured through quantitative measurement alone.

Participants

Seven (7) key participants joined the study: six (6) elementary-aged children from Grades 1 to 2 (ages 6–8 years) who were identified by their teachers as exhibiting significant, consistent resistance to early reading instruction. Of these six child participants, three (3) were male and three (3) were female. All participants came from Piax Elementary School, Division of Pangasinan II, in Villasis, Pangasinan. Additionally, seven (7) parents or guardians of these children participated in separate semi-structured interviews.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who matched the study's criteria: consistent avoidance of reading tasks, limited oral language output in class, and teacher-reported difficulty in engaging with literacy activities. All child participants came from households classified as low-to-moderate income, with caregivers whose own educational attainment ranged from elementary to secondary level. Children with diagnosed learning disabilities were excluded to keep the focus on pre-cognitive and environmental factors rather than neurological conditions. Written informed consent was obtained from all parents and guardians before data collection began.

Research Timeline

Table 1. Research Schedule

Phase	Activity	Period
Phase 1 – Preparation	Ethical clearance, instrument development, participant recruitment	June – August 2025
Phase 2 – Data Collection	Child literacy play sessions, oral storytelling, parent interviews	September – October 2025
Phase 3 – Analysis	Thematic coding, narrative analysis, triangulation	November 2025
Phase 4 – Writing & Review	Manuscript writing and peer review	December 2025 – April 2026

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Three complementary instruments were used to triangulate data across child and parent sources:

- **Literacy Play and Draw-and-Tell Session (Child):** Each child participated in a 45–60 minute individual session involving (a) an open-ended 'What is reading?' activity where the child was invited to demonstrate or explain reading using picture books; (b) a Drawing Your World activity in which the child drew their school world and was asked to locate reading within it; and (c) an oral storytelling task using a wordless picture book to elicit narrative structure, vocabulary, and imaginative detail without placing decoding demands on the child.
- **Oral Storytelling Assessment (Child):** Using two puppets, each child was asked to create an original story about an adventure. The researcher listened for narrative structure (sequential vs. fragmented), linguistic complexity (sentence length and vocabulary), imaginative detail (abstract vs. concrete), and personal connection (self-referential vs. impersonal narratives). Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed.
- **Semi-Structured Parent Interview:** Each parent or guardian participated in a 30–45 minute interview conducted in Filipino or the local dialect (Ilocano or Pangasinense) for accessibility. Interviews explored the availability of print materials at home, observed parental reading behaviors, shared reading practices, and the quality of language use in daily household communication.

To establish trustworthiness, the instruments were reviewed by two educational experts before use. Theoretical validity was discussed with the thesis adviser; construct validity was assessed by examining whether the draw-and-tell activity produced data consistent with children's interview responses — a form of within-method triangulation. Member checking was conducted with two parents who reviewed summary interpretations of their interview data. Negative case analysis was applied to identify and account for participants whose responses diverged from the emerging themes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding, narrative analysis, and cross-method triangulation. Child interview transcripts and storytelling recordings were subjected to inductive thematic coding, identifying recurrent language patterns, narrative structures, and affective expressions related to reading identity. Parent interview data were coded separately and then triangulated with child data to identify convergences (where child behavior matched parent description) and divergences (where perceptions differed). Narrative analysis focused on the structural features of children's oral stories — sequencing, coherence, use of causation language,

and imaginative extension beyond literal observation. All coding was performed by the researcher and reviewed by the thesis adviser to ensure interpretive consistency.

III. Results and Discussion

The findings are organized around the study's four research questions, each corresponding to a key dimension of the Illiterate Imagination phenomenon. Representative direct quotes from children and parents are included to strengthen the empirical grounding of each theme.

Children's Conceptions of Literacy: Reading as Performance and Chore

The dominant theme emerging from child interviews and draw-and-tell sessions was that reading is understood primarily as a high-stakes public act — something performed for teachers and evaluated by others — rather than a private, pleasurable meaning-making activity. When asked what reading is for, children consistently framed it in terms of teacher expectation and social judgment:

"Reading is what you do when Teacher calls your name. If you make a mistake, everyone laughs." — **Child participant, female, Grade 1**

"I don't like reading time. The words are hard and the teacher tells you if you're wrong." — **Child participant, male, Grade 2**

In the draw-and-tell activity, four of the six children either placed reading in an isolated, visually unwelcoming corner of their school drawing (e.g., a small desk alone, far from friends) or omitted it from their picture entirely, confirming that reading is affectively segregated from enjoyable school activities. Only one child voluntarily associated reading with story pleasure. The finding aligns with Holschuh's (2019) observation that learners who grow up in environments where literacy is perceived as duty internalize a sense of defeat before formal schooling.

Table 2. Children's Conceptions of Literacy: Dominant Themes

Theme	Child Narrative Pattern	Implication for Instruction
Reading as Decoding	"Reading is saying the words correctly." Child's mental goal ends at decoding.	Meaning-making is absent from the child's conception; comprehension instruction is pre-empted.
Reading as Performance	"If you make mistakes, everyone knows." Reading is a high-stakes public event.	Anxiety replaces curiosity; round-robin reading practices are especially harmful.
Reading as Adult Activity	"When I'm big, I'll read." Reading belongs to a different, future self.	Identity exclusion: the child has already self-removed from the 'reader' category.
Reading as Chore	"It's boring." Reading has no intrinsic pleasure or value.	No internal motivation to persist through decoding difficulty.

Oral Narrative Expression: Linguistic and Imaginative Deficits

The oral storytelling tasks — both the wordless book retelling and the puppet story — revealed consistent and significant pre-reading linguistic deficits across the six child participants. These deficits are important because they predate decoding instruction; they represent foundational oral language capacities that children need before they can comprehend written text.

"The boy is running. Then there is a dog. Then he falls. The end." — **Child participant, male, Grade 1 (wordless book task)**

"They go. Then they come back." — **Child participant, female, Grade 2 (puppet story)**

Both responses are illustrative of the dominant pattern: a-sequential, unconnected scenes narrated without causal linkage, emotional depth, or imaginative extension. No child spontaneously used language like "because," "after that," or "he felt scared." None made personal connections to the story events. These findings are consistent with Kroesch et al.'s (2024) finding that pre-literacy children from cognitively under-scaffolded environments struggle to mentally represent multi-step sequences.

Table 3. Narrative Expression Among At-Risk Pre-Readers: Themes and Implications

Narrative Dimension	Observed Pattern	Implication for Comprehension
Narrative Structure	Fragmented, a-sequential; each scene narrated in isolation with no plot arc.	Child cannot track plot or causality in written text — essential for comprehension.
Imaginative Detail	Overwhelmingly concrete and literal; only observable actions described.	Inferential capacity is underdeveloped; child cannot go beyond explicit text.
Linguistic Complexity	Simple subject-verb-object sentences; minimal conjunctions or adjectives.	Cannot comprehend grade-level text syntax; oral deficits precede written ones.
Personal Connection	Impersonal; no self-reference, emotion, or text-to-self connection.	Reading remains a task, not a personally meaningful experience.

Home Literacy Environment: Scarcity, Modeling, and Language

Parent interviews consistently described home environments low in narrative print and low in visible reading behavior. Reading materials in the home were almost exclusively functional — religious texts, old school modules, and occasional newspapers — rather than storybooks, comics, or fiction. No parent described a regular shared reading routine:

"We don't really have books at home. I have my Bible. His older sister has her modules. We don't have time to read together — I come home from work, I cook, I sleep." — **Parent, mother of Grade 1 boy**

"I read when I have to — for work or for the church. I don't read for fun. I don't think she has seen me do that." — **Parent, father of Grade 2 girl**

These home environments confirm what print exposure research consistently shows: children who do not encounter narrative reading as a pleasurable, modeled adult activity have no affective template for literacy (Stanovich, 1986). The language used at home was also described as high-context and practical — focused on immediate instructions and daily logistics, with little emphasis on storytelling, descriptive language, or extended discussion. This directly accounts for the oral narrative deficits documented in Table 3.

Table 4. Home Literacy Environment: Parent-Reported Characteristics

Characteristic	Dominant Parent Description	Implication for Child
Print Materials	Functional only (Bible, modules); no storybooks or comics.	Reading is not salient as a source of pleasure or narrative.
Parental Modeling	Parents read only for work or duty; child never sees parent reading for pleasure.	Child has no 'reader identity' model at home.
Shared Reading	Inconsistent; attempts quickly abandoned due to child disinterest or parent fatigue.	No joyful book association; no oral language scaffolding through story.
Language at Home	Practical, high-context communication; little storytelling or descriptive talk.	Child lacks exposure to the decontextualized language needed for academic reading.

Literacy Self-Concept: Fixed Identity and Internalized Failure

The most emotionally significant finding was the degree to which these six-to-eight-year-old children had already internalized a fixed, non-reader identity. When asked directly whether they were "good at reading," all six participants gave negative or externalized responses:

"My sister is the reader in our family. She's smart. I'm the one who likes drawing." — **Child participant, female, Grade 2**

"The letters jump when I look at them. It's not my fault." — **Child participant, male, Grade 1**

The first quote illustrates identity partitioning: the child has assigned the reader role to a sibling, effectively excluding herself. The second quote illustrates the protective attribution to an external, physical cause — "the letters jump" — which shields the child from having to confront the deeper cognitive difficulties of sequencing and inference identified in Table 3. Parents corroborated the depth of this self-concept crisis:

"She cries every time I ask her to read. She says she's stupid. I don't know what to do." — Parent, mother of Grade 1 girl

This internalized shame-based identity is the final, most resistant layer of Illiterate Imagination. Children who believe they are constitutionally unable to read will not invest the cognitive effort required to improve — creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that mirrors Stanovich's (1986) Matthew Effect at the identity level.

Table 5. Literacy Self-Concept: Child and Parent Perspectives

Self-Concept Component	Child Description	Parent Observation
Current Competence	"I'm not good at reading." Fixed, low attribution.	Child cries or refuses when asked to read; avoidance due to shame.
Future Reader Identity	"When I'm big, maybe." Excludes self from 'reader' category now.	Child is competent in other areas (sports, art) — struggle is reading-specific.
Emotional Connection	Places reading in undesirable location in drawings; often omits it.	Child equates reading with punishment and frustration.
Source of Failure	Attributes difficulty to external mechanics ("letters jump").	Protects self-concept by externalizing the cause of failure.

Discussion

The four sets of findings converge to tell a coherent and troubling story about how Illiterate Imagination develops. Children who arrive at school already framing reading as a high-stakes public performance (Table 2) are likely to have grown up in homes where reading was modeled only as work or duty, not as pleasure (Table 4). Their oral narrative sessions reveal that they have had little exposure to the story structures and complex syntax that are prerequisites for comprehension (Table 3). When early reading instruction — often in the form of public oral reading — exposes these pre-existing deficits to social judgment, the result is the internalization of shame and a fixed non-reader identity (Table 5). The cycle is then complete: a child who believes she is not a reader will not attempt the very activities that would help her become one, creating the compounding disadvantage described by Stanovich (1986) as the Matthew Effect.

These findings align with and extend existing research. Stewart and Swanson (2024) documented how attentional deficits extend reading struggles beyond decoding into comprehension — our study suggests that even before decoding, narrative and inferential deficits constrain comprehension capacity. Kroesch et al. (2024) showed that kindergarteners from enriched environments could engage in complex problem-solving; our findings suggest that children from print-scarce homes lack the oral scaffolding for such engagement. Nampila (2021) documented how socioeconomic pressures lead older learners to disengage — our data show that this disengagement begins far earlier, in the affective and imaginative domain.

A classroom example illustrates the practical stakes. Maricel, a composite portrait drawn from the participant data, enters Grade 1 unable to narrate a three-panel picture story in sequence. Her teacher, unfamiliar with oral narrative development, moves quickly to letter-sound instruction. When Maricel is called on to read aloud and stumbles, classmates laugh. By October, Maricel refuses to participate in any literacy activity and tells her mother she is "broken." This trajectory — observable in many Philippine classrooms — is not inevitable. Early identification of oral narrative weakness, combined with low-stakes storytelling activities and explicit praise of imaginative effort, could interrupt the shame-identity cycle before it solidifies.

Our findings differ from studies that emphasize phonological processing as the primary early predictor of reading success (e.g., Stewart & Swanson, 2024) in that we find affective and identity variables to be active disruptors even before phonological awareness instruction begins. The affective dimension — the child's emotional relationship with reading — appears to function as a gating mechanism: if the emotional context is hostile (shame, failure-association, public exposure), no amount of decoding skill will convert a child into a willing, meaning-making reader. This suggests that intervention sequencing matters: self-concept and low-stakes engagement must be addressed before or alongside phonics instruction, not after.

The study also highlights a systemic gap in parent engagement. None of the seven parents described receiving guidance from the school on how to support oral language development at home. Yet even simple, low-cost practices — asking a child to retell the day's events in a complete story, making up a bedtime adventure story, or singing songs with narrative structure — can meaningfully build the linguistic and imaginative capacities documented as deficient in Table 3. Schools and communities can support this through parental workshops, community library programs, and book-donation initiatives.

IV. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that early reading failure is not primarily a decoding problem — it is an imagination problem, an identity problem, and a home environment problem. The concept of Illiterate Imagination captures the toxic confluence of a child's conception of reading as performance, pre-existing oral narrative and inferential deficits, a home environment low in print saliency, and an already-forming fixed non-reader self-concept. These factors reinforce one another and, if unaddressed, produce the compounding disadvantage described by Stanovich's Matthew Effect.

The study's findings carry concrete implications for three key stakeholders:

- Teachers should eliminate high-stakes public reading formats (especially round-robin reading) that trigger shame responses in struggling readers. Instead, they should integrate daily oral storytelling, dramatic play, and wordless book activities into the early literacy curriculum — building narrative schema and inferential language before or alongside

formal decoding instruction. Growth mindset language and literacy identity exercises (e.g., "I am still becoming a reader") should be embedded in everyday classroom culture.

- Parents can make a significant difference through simple, low-cost home practices: a nightly five-minute bedtime story (told or read), asking children to narrate the day's events in sequence, and ensuring that at least one family member is visibly seen reading for pleasure each day. Schools should provide brief parental workshops in Filipino or the local dialect that explain these practices in accessible terms.
- Schools and local government units should consider establishing community book-sharing programs, barangay library corners, and parent-teacher reading circles that normalize narrative print access in low-income communities. These initiatives address the structural print scarcity that underlies many of the affective and cognitive deficits documented in this study.

This study is limited by its small sample size (six child participants from a single school) and its reliance on researcher observation and participant self-report. Future research should replicate these findings in larger, multi-site Philippine contexts; examine whether structured storytelling interventions (e.g., an eight-week oral narrative program) produce measurable changes in literacy self-concept and reading engagement; and investigate the role of Philippine oral traditions — riddles, folk tales, singing — as culturally grounded scaffolds for narrative development. Longitudinal tracking of participants after intervention would also strengthen the evidence base for early affective and oral-language-first approaches to literacy instruction.

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