

Beyond Reading Deficits: Literacy Poverty as a Leadership and Governance Challenge in the Philippines

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The Philippine education sector reached a defining moment in 2025 and 2026 as literacy poverty emerged not merely as a classroom challenge but as a national governance concern. Once understood primarily as the inability to read, literacy poverty is now recognized as learners' limited capacity to comprehend, interpret, and apply information in meaningful situations. Its consequences extend beyond schools, influencing workforce readiness, economic competitiveness, civic participation, and social mobility. Addressing this crisis therefore demands more than curriculum reforms or additional learning materials; it requires visionary leadership capable of transforming educational systems into environments where every learner has the opportunity to succeed.

This urgency became unmistakable following the release of the EDCOM II Year Two Report, *Fixing the Foundations: A Matter of National Survival* (2025). The report revealed that more than half of Philippine public schools continued operating without permanent principals, while 62% of high school teachers were assigned to subjects outside their areas of specialization. These realities weaken instructional quality and hinder the consistent implementation of educational policies. Rather than viewing these shortcomings as isolated administrative concerns, EDCOM II (2025) emphasized that they reflect deeper governance failures that continue to undermine foundational learning across the country.

The situation became even more alarming in 2026 when the EDCOM II Final Report, *Turning Point: A Decade of Necessary Reforms*, disclosed that 48.76% of Grade 3 learners during School Year 2024–2025 remained unable to read at grade level. Even more concerning, only 0.40% of Grade 12 learners achieved mastery, illustrating what the Commission described as a national “proficiency collapse.” These findings demonstrate that literacy poverty is not simply a learner issue but the cumulative result of fragmented governance, inconsistent policy implementation, and long-standing inequities within the education system. They also illustrate that learning deficits become increasingly difficult to reverse when foundational literacy is neglected during the early years of schooling.

These realities shift the conversation from teaching children how to read toward examining how educational leadership shapes learning outcomes. Curriculum revisions and instructional reforms possess little value when schools lack leaders capable of implementing them effectively. As Leithwood et al. (2020) argued, educational leadership influences learner achievement by strengthening instructional quality, fostering professional collaboration, and creating coherent school improvement efforts. The Philippine experience illustrates that meaningful reform depends not only on sound policies but also on leaders who can translate national priorities into effective classroom practice.

Leadership also requires acknowledging that literacy poverty is inseparable from broader social inequalities. Many Filipino learners continue to experience



poverty, malnutrition, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning resources, and limited opportunities to develop literacy outside school. These disadvantages are particularly evident in geographically isolated and economically marginalized communities, where educational inequities begin long before formal schooling. Recognizing these realities, UNICEF Philippines (2026) emphasized that improving literacy requires simultaneous investments in early childhood development, equitable learning opportunities, teacher support, and accountable governance rather than isolated interventions.

The government's recent reforms reflect this growing recognition. Through the MATATAG Agenda and the Strengthened Senior High School Curriculum, the Department of Education has sought to strengthen foundational competencies and better prepare learners for higher education and employment. Yet policies alone cannot eliminate literacy poverty if schools continue to struggle with leadership shortages, teacher specialization mismatches, and unequal educational resources. Sustainable reform depends on leaders who can transform national initiatives into meaningful improvements within schools and communities.

Educational leadership today therefore extends beyond administrative efficiency. It demands instructional leadership, evidence-based decision-making, teacher development, and collaboration with families and communities. Kilag et al. (2025) maintained that lasting educational improvement emerges through collaborative leadership that continuously builds organizational capacity, while Sun (2026) emphasized that leaders who prioritize teaching and learning produce stronger educational outcomes. A meaningful partnerships among schools, families, and communities reinforce learners' academic development and create environments where literacy can flourish beyond the classroom.

Therefore, literacy poverty is not solely an educational concern but a national development challenge. Every child denied meaningful literacy opportunities represents lost human potential that affects communities, industries, and the country's future. As Nussbaum (2011) argued, education expands human capabilities by enabling informed participation, critical judgment, and personal agency. For the Philippines, dismantling literacy poverty requires leaders who view educational reform not as the implementation of policies alone but as a sustained commitment to equity, accountability, and opportunity. Only through such leadership can empirical evidence be transformed into enduring educational progress and a more inclusive future for every Filipino learner.

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