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RECEIVED 12 June 2025

REVISED 10 November 2025

ACCEPTED 24 November 2025

PUBLISHED 16 December 2025

## CITATION

Manuel JPG, Gatcho ARG and  
Areta GC (2025) Multilingual reading  
interventionists for junior high school: a  
response to the Philippines' functional literacy gap.  
*Front. Educ.* 10:1646036.  
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2025.1646036

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# Multilingual reading interventionists for junior high school: a response to the Philippines' functional literacy gap

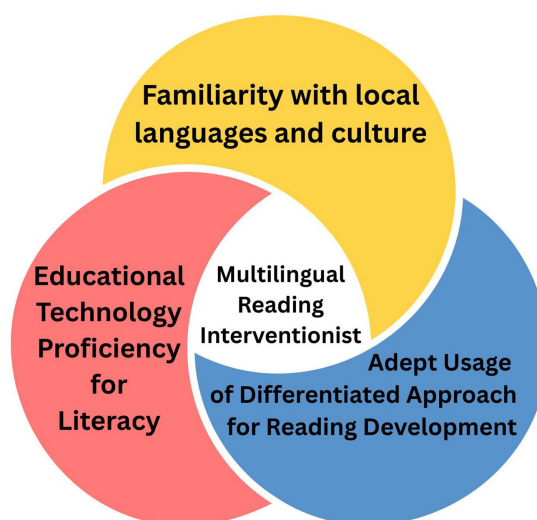
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Functional illiteracy remains a persistent and complex issue in the Philippines, as underscored by data from the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS). Overlapping challenges such as socioeconomic inequality, linguistic diversity, limited instructional support, and restricted language access continue to hinder literacy efforts despite numerous interventions. This policy brief evaluates current responses and proposes the institutionalization of Multilingual Reading Interventionists (MRIs) in junior high schools as a strategic way forward. Trained in regional languages and grounded in local contexts, MRIs are envisioned as school-based professionals who provide equitable, culturally responsive, and differentiated reading support. To realize this proposal, key policy directions include integrating MRI training into teacher education institutions, aligning continuing professional development systems, and creating formal teaching positions under the Department of Education.

## KEYWORDS

functional literacy, literacy policy, Multilingual Reading Interventionist, Philippine education, reading equity, teacher training



GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

## Introduction

Functional literacy (FL) is vital in optimizing learning processes, serving as the gateway to acquiring other essential competencies needed to become a functional and productive citizen (Cocchiarella, 2018; Medzhidova et al., 2021). The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), through the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), offers the most updated and concrete view of what it means to be functionally literate. According to Philippine Statistics Authority (2025), FL is “the ability to read, write, compute, and comprehend,” encompassing the skills necessary for meaningful participation in society. This definition underscores that literacy extends beyond basic academic abilities. It involves applying learned skills to real-life contexts. Higher levels of FL reflect the capacity to transfer these competencies across varied situations, while lower levels indicate limited progress in personal, academic, and social development.

The 2024 FLEMMS reported that there are approximately 18 million Filipinos aged 10–64 who are functionally illiterate (Manila Bulletin, 2025). In a society increasingly driven by digital platforms and text-based communication, the implications of this crisis are particularly alarming. The Department of Education (DepEd) has responded by intensifying programs related to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and foundational reading. In addition, the Literacy Coordinating Council (LCC) has been activated to support these initiatives and ensure a stronger push for literacy development across all regions (Department of Education, 2025a,b).

This policy brief evaluates the government’s ongoing efforts to address functional illiteracy considering the 2024 FLEMMS data. It surveys current activities, interventions, and literacy programs implemented nationwide. While there is no shortage of local studies advocating for the advancement of FL (Malubay and Manuel, 2022; Gatcho A. R. G. et al., 2024), the scope and effectiveness of these initiatives require deeper scrutiny to determine their actual impact. This paper is guided by the need to assess current approaches’ responsiveness and explore policy mechanisms that can strengthen their outcomes.

We examine the complexities of FL programming, assessing both implementation and effectiveness. This inquiry identifies specific gaps and challenges, emphasizing the need for a more robust, efficient, and inclusive framework. As such, this policy brief proposes a complementary mechanism to support DepEd’s existing efforts: the institutionalization of Multilingual Reading Interventionists in junior high schools. This initiative aims to contribute policy insights that can reinforce current strategies and enhance the overall direction of the national literacy agenda, boosting the numbers surveyed by FLEMMS relative to functional literacy.

## Defining functional literacy in context

FL is not a new concept in the Philippine educational landscape. Since the emergence of the New Literacies framework, the country has gradually aligned its systems with the evolving definitions of literacy. Given the ambiguous definitions of the concept (Khranova et al., 2022), the phrase must be given specifics. Crouch and Montoya

(2017) appealed to UNESCO’s terms and developed FL as the ability to process printed and written materials linked with different settings. FL is emphasized in the Philippines as FLEMMS has conducted regular surveys every 5 years since 2008, providing a consistent data source to monitor it across age groups and regions (Parreño, 2023). Alongside this, assessment tools such as the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) have been developed and applied to evaluate learners’ literacy skills (Campilla and Cariño, 2024).

Recent research suggests that the institutionalization of mandatory kindergarten has contributed to improved FL rates, particularly in early education (Abrigo and Francisco, 2024). However, addressing FL remains a complex challenge. Studies have highlighted the heterogeneity of factors that affect FL development among Filipinos—including socioeconomic status, access to print materials, and language of instruction—which complicates the implementation of consistent literacy solutions (Owada et al., 2019). One persistent issue is the low FL levels among parents, which limit opportunities to reinforce reading and comprehension skills at home (Gatcho A. G. et al., 2024; Saysi and Batuctoc, 2023). These contextual barriers reveal that FL has long been a pressing concern, with roots traceable as far back as the early 20th century.

Several interventions have been introduced to address FL gaps across various learner profiles. For example, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) has offered structured extension activities to support out-of-school youths and adult learners in developing FL skills (Ocampo, 2021). Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches have been employed to reach learners across key developmental stages and learning modalities (Cavallaro and Sembiente, 2020; Mandak et al., 2018). The agency initiated professional development programs to capacitate reading teachers in the local schools (Manuel J. P. G., 2024; Manuel J. P., 2024). Evidence from other contexts also shows that when schools deploy trained reading teachers and literacy coaches, measurable gains in reading proficiency are achieved (Bean, 2015; Carlisle and Berebitsky, 2011). Culturally responsive and translanguaging-based literacy practices in multilingual classrooms have been shown to enhance comprehension and engagement (Cavallaro and Sembiente, 2020; Manuel and Manuel, 2025). These findings underscore the need to adapt proven specialist models into the Philippine context through Multilingual Reading Interventionists (MRIs). The more recent initiatives by the national government also mandated the Education Commission of the Philippines (EDCOM) to examine the implications of the FLEMMS survey for Filipino learners (Senate of the Philippines, 2025). EDCOM categorized a massive number of junior high school graduates as functionally illiterate. Such statements moved the educational agency of the country to strengthen its present program on literacy, Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA).

Additionally, the country enjoyed international support in the Southeast Asian Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) and was provided with foundational reading standards as developmental targets (Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics, n.d.). Nevertheless, local organizations that believed in the role of the primary languages in the learning process seemed to have been ignored in suspending the use of Mother-Tongue Based instruction (Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 2024). These activities underscore the sustained attention afforded to FL, confirming its central role in the broader agenda of literacy development in the Philippines.

## Diagnosing the barriers to literacy equity

The ongoing battle against functional illiteracy in the Philippines presents layered and persistent challenges, drawing attention from specialists across disciplines to formulate viable solutions. This section highlights subtler yet critical factors contributing to slow progress in improving FL outcomes. These often-overlooked challenges require urgent recognition in national policy efforts.

The family environment is foundational in shaping a child's early literacy development. As emphasized by [Catolos et al. \(2020\)](#), learning begins at home—or, at the very least, is profoundly influenced by the sociocultural and literacy dynamics within the household. Families should provide intentional and supportive opportunities to foster children's reading interest and comprehension skills. However, this is not always the case in many Filipino homes.

[Biñas and Garvida \(2023\)](#) observed that children of functionally illiterate parents often perform below expected reading levels, citing reduced interest in reading and limited exposure to literacy-rich interactions as key barriers. Similarly, [Dizon and Banawa \(2016\)](#) documented the challenges faced by grandparents who assumed caregiving roles but lacked the literacy skills to support their grandchildren's academic development. Compounding these home-based challenges is the linguistic mismatch between home and school languages, often resulting in long-term literacy gaps ([Paradis and Jia, 2017](#)). The presence of illiterate guardians—whether parents or extended family members—has a demonstrably negative impact on children's FL growth, creating intergenerational cycles of educational disadvantage.

Studies postulated the different needs of learners in reading development ([Tavera and Casinillo, 2020](#); [Bernardo, 2023](#)). Accordingly, each learner has a specific learning demand that coincides with an optimal reception and retention, particularly with FL. Secondary-level teachers have developed differentiated reading approaches to address these diverse demands and challenges, allowing different methodologies to help Filipino students ([Hagid and Apostol, 2024](#)). Nevertheless, the challenge keeps asking for fresh insights, especially since the learners' needs keep evolving. This is on top of the recognized factors associated with reading development: the pupils' diverse languages, school administration, school facilities, teachers, and other community factors ([Estremera and Estremera, 2018](#)). Even in the present generation, with all the studies accessible to researchers and practitioners, the challenge of having diversity among the learners' needs remains a struggle for FL development.

It is worth noting how the national agency has given strong reading advocacies in the early years, dedicating ELLNA to help the young ones achieve acceptable literacy levels. While Filipino teachers remained strong in helping junior high school learners in their reading growth, national support, such as ELLNA, has been missing. Considering the expanding field of literacy, PHIL IRI has remained its principal diagnostic tool ([Miguel, 2024](#)). Furthermore, while reading standards are offered in both 2019 and 2024 SEA-PLM frameworks, the arbitrary generation of interventions among high school teachers provides limited support.

Remedial reading teachers are essential in advancing the national literacy agenda ([Gatcho and Bautista, 2019](#)). While growing interest is in strengthening this role through training and professional development ([Manuel J. P. G., 2024](#); [Manuel J. P., 2024](#)), current

institutional structures remain misaligned with the evolving demands of FL instruction. The roles, policies, and functions attached to reading teachers require a more precise definition and alignment to serve the literacy goals of the country better. Although the Philippine education system has provisions for teachers to support FL initiatives, many educators are assigned reading-related responsibilities despite coming from unrelated subject specializations ([Rosano et al., 2025](#)). This is particularly true in secondary schools, where these assignments are often added to their primary teaching loads, with little formal preparation in reading instruction. This raises concerns about teacher motivation, unclear roles, and insufficient training for effective FL interventions.

Technology enhancements in reading interventions have been prevalent across literacy and learning processes ([Quimsing and Cruz, 2024](#)). However, learners' and reading teachers' unequal access and familiarity have not contributed to a speedy advancement. [Manuel J. P. G. \(2024\)](#) and [Manuel J. P. \(2024\)](#) observed this phenomenon as common in Southeast Asian countries, recommending the maximization of technological infrastructure to help the learners achieve higher literacy rates. Among secondary learners, FL efforts would be significantly strengthened if this aspect of teaching were emphasized and properly supported across all schools.

## Addressing the functional literacy gap through Multilingual Reading Interventionists

Functional illiteracy in the Philippines stems from overlapping gaps in language access, instructional support, and reading relevance, especially in classrooms where the language spoken at home differs from the language used in school ([Paradis and Jia, 2017](#)). Hence, we recommend strategically institutionalizing Multilingual Reading Interventionists (MRIs), literacy specialists trained to deliver culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and locally relevant reading interventions. Although remedial reading teachers are present in many Philippine schools ([Gatcho and Bautista, 2019](#)), their roles remain broadly defined and often do not meet learners' multilingual and diagnostic needs. They include language and homeroom teachers who are assigned these roles but are not given the same recognition to be considered a Plantilla item. As a distinct school role, the MRIs would have specific tasks on the literacy growth of the learners, trained not just in theoretical models and frameworks in the reading field, but also in pedagogical links considering multilingual students. This brief intends to justify that MRIs should be given the same importance as Special Education teachers, as their expertise would also be targeting specific tasks, albeit in the reading field. This proposal focuses on the junior high school level, where FL challenges persist but often receive less targeted intervention ([Apiles, 2025](#)), despite students being expected to transition from learning to read to reading to learn. This also addresses the age bracket surveyed by FLEMMS concerning functional literacy. This also addresses the age bracket surveyed by FLEMMS concerning functional literacy. MRIs reflect a more substantial commitment to FL by formalizing their training in regional languages, differentiated instruction, and accessible educational technology. Unlike reading specialists or literacy coaches in monolingual systems ([Bean, 2015](#); [Carlisle and Berebitsky, 2011](#)),

MRIs would directly respond to Filipino students' linguistic and instructional challenges under the MATATAG curriculum. It would also implicate multicultural sensitivities among these specialists, as culture is heavily linked to language. This would empower the students in their reading activities as these MRIs would enhance their familiarity with instructions, materials, and content.

MRIs would bridge the recent curricular changes in the MATATAG curriculum relative to the use of local languages. Although the curriculum departs from the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, the linguistic diversity of Philippine classrooms remains a structural reality. The proposed MRI role does not advocate for the revival of MTB-MLE, but instead offers a pragmatic support system that aligns with the goals of MATATAG. It provides emphasis on functional literacy developmental activities, following [Philippine Statistics Authority's \(2025\)](#) definition of FL, in junior high school settings. By enabling teachers to recognize and respond to the language backgrounds of their students—particularly when such backgrounds hinder comprehension—MRIs can help advance MATATAG's core objective of strengthening foundational learning, especially in reading proficiency.

MRIs would undergo regionally anchored training facilitated by accredited Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) and the National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP), ensuring that each specialist gains familiarity with the local languages and cultural dynamics of their deployment areas. For instance, MRIs assigned to the National Capital Region may receive orientation on supporting students who speak Bicolano, Pangasinan, or Visayan. At the same time, those in Mindanao would be trained to address the linguistic needs of Cebuano, Tausug, or Maranao speakers. This localized preparation would not require shifting the medium of instruction away from English and Filipino, as mandated by the MATATAG curriculum, but instead allows MRIs to design supplemental support and culturally responsive strategies that affirm learners' language identities and enhance comprehension across diverse classrooms.

Moreover, MRIs would be trained in differentiated instruction, enabling them to design reading interventions that accommodate diverse learner profiles, including students with minimal home literacy support. For instance, in classrooms where students speak different languages or come from families with no reading culture, MRIs can embed region-specific folktales, local history, and community-based narratives into reading materials to boost relevance and engagement. Visual aids, bilingual glossaries, and story mapping techniques can also support learners with decoding or comprehension difficulties ([Manuel and Manuel, 2025](#)). Such context-aware strategies help close long-standing equity gaps, particularly for students in socioeconomically marginalized or linguistically isolated communities. They make literacy instruction inclusive and resonant with their lived realities. The accommodation for the diverse learner profiles assumes multiculturalism as an integral part of the classroom, and it displays the link between the students' preferences for better reading growth.

Finally, MRIs must be prepared to integrate educational technology into their practice in context-sensitive ways. While adaptive reading apps, game-based platforms, and audio-assisted texts hold great promise ([Quimsing and Cruz, 2024](#)), their reach remains uneven due to limited connectivity and digital training. In remote or resource-limited areas, MRIs can champion practical, low-tech alternatives such as preloaded tablets with apps like “Feed the

Monster” or open-source offline tools like “Kolibri,” which offer interactive reading content without continuous internet access. Solar-powered audio devices with narrated storybooks in regional languages or basic mobile phones preloaded with SMS-based reading prompts and stories can foster engagement. By modeling such locally adapted and cost-effective strategies, MRIs can ensure that educational technology serves as a bridge—not a barrier—to FL across all Philippine classrooms.

The establishment of MRIs would professionalize and specialize the country's response to functional illiteracy—providing school-level expertise that is both context-sensitive and pedagogically grounded. By concentrating on junior high schools, this proposal supports a critical segment of the education system where FL issues often go unaddressed due to competing academic demands. As a complement to existing efforts under the MATATAG curriculum, MRIs offer a forward-looking strategy to ensure that no learner graduates without the ability to read, comprehend, and meaningfully participate in civic and economic life.

## Policy implications

The proposal to institutionalize MRIs carries important implications across multiple layers of the Philippine education system, particularly in strengthening both preservice teacher preparation and in-service professional development. Realizing this role will require coordinated adjustments in teacher preparation, continuing professional development, and staffing policy—all aligned with the overarching goal of strengthening FL outcomes nationwide.

First, TEIs must refine and deepen their reading education tracks to prepare future MRIs for Filipino classrooms' linguistic and pedagogical realities. They may offer a 12- to 15-unit Certificate in Multilingual Reading Education (CMRE), jointly designed by TEIs and NEAP to support this. The CMRE can serve as an elective for preservice teachers or a post-baccalaureate qualification for in-service teachers, recognizing MRI specialization within the existing teacher licensure framework and ensuring coherence with current teacher-education systems.

While some TEIs already offer specializations in reading instruction, many do not adequately emphasize translanguaging pedagogy or differentiated instructional design—essential competencies for working with multilingual and diverse learners. This allows instructional design to be developed in the university's mother tongue, enriching the contextual preparation of MRIs. This adds a layer of familiarity to the local academic setting but would also demand necessary sensitivity to students with differing preferences, especially multilingual ones. Additionally, digital literacy must be incorporated more systematically into foundational training. However, institutional capacity remains limited. As of this writing, only six institutions in the country offer a master's degree related to Reading Education: University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, UP Open University (UPOU), Philippine Normal University (PNU), Mindanao State University (MSU) Main Campus, MSU Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT), and MSU-Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU-TCTO). At the doctoral level, only UP Diliman and PNU offer a PhD in Reading Education. This scarcity of advanced training programs represents a structural bottleneck in producing the volume and specialization required for MRI



implementation. Expanding graduate-level offerings and supporting regional TELs in launching new reading education programs will be critical in scaling this initiative, particularly in regions where junior high school FL outcomes remain low.

Second, the MRI role requires enhancements in existing professional advancement systems. The Philippines has established strong teacher development foundations through INSET, NEAP-led training, and university partnerships. However, the MRI framework necessitates a new layer of specialization that is responsive to local language contexts, evolving reading pedagogy, and locally appropriate technologies. Given that a multicultural classroom includes a wide range of local languages, MRI training should be inclusive of culture-sensitive attributes of culture-sensitive attributes that MRIs ought to possess to help them be more professionally accommodating. NEAP and other CPD-accrediting bodies must design and support structured learning pathways that enable in-service teachers to transition into MRI roles through intensive, regionally adapted training modules focused on the specific needs of junior high school learners.

Lastly, the success of this proposal depends on creating a formal teaching item for MRIs within the DepEd staffing structure. Much like positions designated for special education teachers, MRIs must have defined roles, functions, and institutional recognition. Establishing a dedicated item would clarify expectations, incentivize uptake, and ensure sustainability. It would also lead to the development of clear, role-specific competencies for MRIs, unlike the current remedial reading teachers whose professional standards default to the more generic Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST). This would signal that addressing functional literacy is not merely a curricular concern but a personnel and equity priority at the heart of the education system. Additionally, MRIs must be supported in cultivating active partnerships with families and local communities to bridge school-based literacy efforts with home practices and community resources, reinforcing reading development during the critical transition from elementary to junior high school.

## Conclusion

This policy brief examined the alarming rates of functional illiteracy in the Philippines as reported by FLEMMS 2024 and responded by proposing the institutionalization of MRIs. Positioned to complement existing DepEd programs, the MRI is envisioned as a junior high school-based literacy expert equipped with regionally grounded language proficiency, differentiated instructional capacity, and strategic technology integration for functional literacy development. This proposal highlights key areas for policy intervention: teacher education curriculum reform, CPD-aligned professional development, and the formal creation of a specialized

reading intervention post in schools. While remedial reading teachers exist, the MRI role provides a more targeted, context-sensitive response to the persistent gaps in literacy equity at the secondary level. Future research may explore the broader educational and social impact of deploying MRIs, particularly in enabling junior high schools to respond more to Filipino students' diverse linguistic and learning needs.

## Author contributions

JM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. AG: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. GA: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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