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The paradox of graduate programs in Reading Education in the Philippines amid a literacy crisis

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The Philippines faces a paradox in advancing literacy education. Even as the nation confronts a deepening literacy crisis, graduate programs in Reading Education, established to train literacy leaders, operate under fragile conditions. Their expansion has been shaped less by disciplinary strength than by three forces: the scarcity of Reading-trained faculty, policy incentives that reward proliferation over rigor, and institutional survival strategies that privilege prestige and enrollment. These dynamics erode the quality of the discipline, compromise student preparation, weaken system capacity, and diminish trust in graduate credentials. Yet the crisis also presents opportunity. Strengthened faculty development, interuniversity collaboration, rigorous accreditation standards, and recognition of Reading Education as a national investment can transform these programs into credible engines of reform. The Philippine case contributes to the comparative higher education research agenda by illustrating how program growth in specialized fields risks undermining disciplinary integrity when not matched by faculty capacity and institutional safeguards.

KEYWORDS

accreditation and quality assurance, faculty development, graduate education, literacy crisis, reading education

Introduction

The literacy crisis in the Philippines has been documented with striking consistency by both international and national assessments. PISA findings show that Filipino students perform well below global averages in reading, with large numbers unable to demonstrate even basic comprehension (Bernardo and Mante-Estacio, 2023; Chavez, 2025; Haw et al., 2021). National surveys, including the most recent FLEMMS, extend this picture across the life course, showing that nearly one-third of adolescents and adults remain functionally illiterate despite high rates of basic literacy (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024). These figures have generated calls for urgent reforms in curriculum, instruction, and teacher preparation.

Yet prevailing responses to the literacy crisis remain largely technical. Policy discourse often frames literacy failure as a matter of instructional method, curricular alignment, or assessment performance, with limited attention to the broader social ecologies in which reading is cultivated. Evidence from family literacy research suggests that reading competence is shaped not only by schooling but by sustained home practices, parental modeling, and affective engagement with text, influences that persist into adolescence and adulthood (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2020). When these dimensions are excluded, reform

efforts risk addressing surface deficits rather than structural conditions. Equally absent is a critical perspective that interrogates how literacy demands accumulate across educational trajectories. Studies of teacher education show that many university students enter programs with reading competencies misaligned with academic expectations, revealing long-standing systemic failures rather than isolated instructional gaps (Orellana et al., 2024). Emerging technological responses, including generative artificial intelligence, further complicate this landscape by expanding access to text while potentially weakening deep reading and critical engagement if left theoretically unanchored (Matto et al., 2025). These dynamics position literacy as a structural problem that higher education must address conceptually, not only pedagogically.

Graduate programs in Reading Education form part of the tertiary infrastructure meant to provide the disciplinary expertise required to confront the literacy problem. Their mandate is to prepare reading specialists who can design interventions, mentor colleagues, and advance literacy research within schools and universities (Ciampa and Reisboard, 2020). However, even as demand for such specialists grows, many programs are launched and sustained without the very expertise they are tasked to cultivate.

This paper examines that paradox from the vantage point of higher education. It describes the current state of graduate programs in Reading Education in the Philippines, identifies the structural and policy drivers underlying their precarious condition, assesses the implications for higher education's legitimacy and capacity, and proposes future directions for strengthening program sustainability. By situating the literacy crisis within the context of graduate program development, the analysis underscores a central tension: higher education is both expected to produce literacy leaders and at risk of undermining the very field on which such leadership depends.

The state of graduate reading education in the Philippines

Graduate programs in Reading Education in the Philippines are not widely distributed, and those that exist reveal more about the constraints of the higher education system than about disciplinary aspiration alone. A handful of institutions have attempted to establish programs, often to meet perceived regional demand or to comply with national policies encouraging graduate expansion. Yet these efforts are uneven in scope and quality, underscoring a deeper structural imbalance in Philippine higher education (Trinidad and Leviste, 2021; Welch, 2011). The intent to provide advanced training is laudable. The institutional capacity to sustain such training, however, remains unstable.

Historically, only two universities—the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman and the Philippine Normal University (PNU)—have functioned as the principal sites for cultivating Reading Education expertise. Both maintain master's and doctoral programs recognized as legitimate pipelines of disciplinary authority. Graduates from these programs have become teacher educators, literacy researchers, and policy advisers, thereby extending the reach of the discipline. Beyond these centers, however, higher education has not produced comparable hubs of

expertise. The consequence is a narrow supply line of qualified faculty relative to the magnitude of the national literacy crisis.

More recently, several regional universities, including campuses of the Mindanao State University (MSU) system, have introduced master's programs in Reading Education. On the surface, such initiatives signal responsiveness: they acknowledge the need for literacy leadership beyond metropolitan centers. Yet they also expose the vulnerabilities of program sustainability in resource-constrained higher education environments. Where Reading-trained faculty are scarce, institutions routinely assign core Reading Education courses to faculty trained in allied fields, most commonly English Language Education (Golde, 2005). In several regional programs, this results in single faculty members carrying multiple Reading courses despite having no doctoral training or publication record in Reading itself, a practice that satisfies staffing requirements while leaving disciplinary expertise thinly distributed.

This faculty misalignment reflects a disciplinary distinction, while the English Language Education approach emphasizes language proficiency, literary analysis, grammar, and communicative competencies; Reading Education as a separate area of study is based on cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental psychological theories of reading, with specialized foci in reading processes, assessment, intervention, and literacy research. Assigning programs to faculty without rigorous Reading Education training often shifts the curricular focus toward language and literature, undermining evidence-based reading instruction, fragmenting disciplinary coherence, limiting research capacity, and producing graduates ill-prepared to address persistent literacy challenges (Snow et al., 2005; Bean, 2015; Moats, 2009).

The misalignment has tangible consequences. The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order 15 *Commission on Higher Education* (2019), for example, requires graduate students to publish scholarly work in their field of specialization. In programs staffed by faculty without strong publication records in Reading, the mandate becomes burdensome and, at times, inequitable. Espinosa et al. (2025) have aptly described the situation as “the blind leading the blind.” What appears at first to be a matter of uneven individual competence is in fact a systemic problem: a nationwide faculty-discipline mismatch rooted in the structural limitations of Philippine higher education.

Curricular weakness is most visible in program design. In several graduate Reading programs, course offerings replicate Language Education sequences, emphasizing linguistics, literature, or general pedagogy, while omitting foundational Reading courses such as assessment, intervention design, and diagnostic research methods. This pattern reflects more than pragmatic resource use. It produces a systemic mismatch between program goals and the epistemological demands of Reading Education, a discipline grounded in theories of meaning construction, reading difficulty, and evidence-based intervention. Where, Reading-trained faculty are lacking to theorize, innovate, and contextualize content (Armstrong et al., 2013; Bean, 2015), Reading Education is absorbed into language pedagogy rather than sustained as a distinct field of inquiry.

Institutional responses, indeed, have mostly been reactive. Universities across the country typically pursue the recruitment of Reading-trained specialists only in anticipation of accreditation reviews or external evaluations. While these compliance-based interventions may meet short-term regulatory requirements, they fail to solve the chronic problem of a lack of discipline expertise or ensure that program quality is stable and consistent over time (Bean, 2015; Commission on Higher Education, 2019). The result is a curious state of the field in which graduate Reading programs have an explicit existence in higher education but stand on shaky ground in terms of faculty-level expertise, curricular coherence, and disciplinarity. Maintaining Reading Education as a legitimate disciplinary field will require transcending curricular borrowing to purposive, discipline-referenced design grounded in the field's theoretical, empirical, and professional concerns.

These dynamics arise from how policies are being interpreted and implemented by institutions as efforts to comply with national standards resulting to a disciplinary mismatch as mirrored in CHED evaluations of graduate education, in Department of Education (DepEd) and Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reports on Philippine Statistics Authority (2024), and in the persistent low performance of Filipino learners on international assessments such as PISA (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, 2019). This focuses on the crucial role of Reading Education graduate programs for the in-depth preparation of both pre-service teachers and in-service professionals to become reading specialists who will effectively apply classroom literacy instruction across basic education, anchored in its unique disciplinary nature.

To understand why programs are launched despite weak expertise and fragile foundations, it is necessary to examine the structural and policy drivers that shape their development.

Structural drivers of these challenges

One major driver of the proliferation of graduate programs in Reading Education lies in the policy incentives that shape higher education itself. The Commission on Higher Education has long emphasized accreditation, faculty credentials, and program expansion as visible signs of institutional legitimacy, setting out policies, standards, and guidelines for graduate programs that require specific faculty qualifications, program outcomes, and research components that institutions must meet to obtain and maintain recognition (CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, Series of 2019). Universities respond in predictable ways: they launch new graduate programs as markers of prestige, enhancing their profile for national recognition and international rankings. Under such conditions, a master's or doctoral program, regardless of its disciplinary depth, functions less as an academic endeavor than as a credentialing device. Policy pressures, including accreditation rules and publication mandates, reinforce this dynamic by rewarding program establishment over program quality.

A second and more enduring cause is the scarcity of Reading Education faculty. Olvido et al. (2024), in evaluating the quality of graduates from Philippine Teacher Education Institutions, underscored the urgency of deeper training and specialization in reading to address national literacy challenges. William et al.

(2025) similarly found that even in urban areas—where educational resources are assumed to be richer—trained reading specialists remain in short supply. The result is an uneven distribution of expertise across regional campuses, many of which are forced to rely on faculty from allied disciplines reassigned into Reading Education roles. This scarcity is structural, not temporary, rooted in the limited number of doctoral offerings and the slow turnover of graduates qualified to staff programs.

For many universities, however, the establishment of a graduate program is less about disciplinary expertise than about institutional survival. Tuition income, community expectations, and the competitive pressure to keep pace with peer institutions drive program creation even when qualified faculty are lacking (Newfield, 2018). In these cases, Reading Education operates more as a label than as a fully developed discipline. Existing resources are repurposed; courses are rebranded. The calculation is pragmatic: having some kind of graduate program appears better than having none, even if the program falls short of disciplinary rigor.

This combination of policy pressure, faculty scarcity, and institutional survival is not unique to the Philippines. Universities worldwide face the same dilemma when demand for graduate preparation in certain fields outpaces the supply of doctoral-trained faculty. Graduate programs in special education, educational technology, and early childhood education, for instance, have expanded rapidly despite limited pools of specialists (Kauffman et al., 2024; Silberfeld and Mitchell, 2018). To sustain them, institutions rely on faculty from adjacent fields, recycle curricula, and recruit outside experts largely to satisfy accreditation requirements. The Philippine case of Reading Education thus exemplifies a broader pattern in higher education: graduate programs expand faster than the expertise needed to anchor them, leaving disciplinary integrity and institutional legitimacy in tenuous balance.

Implications for graduate education and literacy development

The first and most immediate threat concerns the legitimacy of Reading Education as a discipline within higher education. Disciplinary literacy and literacy instruction underscore that reading and literacy scholarship encompasses unique theories and practices that extend beyond general language arts teaching, distinguishing it as a specialized area of academic inquiry (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012; Goldman et al., 2016). Diluting these boundaries erodes the field's ability to define itself and to shape literacy policy and practice.

The weakening of graduate Reading Education programs signals a deeper erosion of structural capacity within the education system. When programs operate without sustained disciplinary expertise, higher education loses its ability to generate research, mentor practitioners, and design scalable literacy interventions. This does not merely affect program quality; it constrains the system's long-term problem-solving capacity. The literacy crisis, in this sense, functions both as a cause and a consequence of structural weakness. Low literacy limits socioeconomic mobility and workforce productivity, while under-resourced educational systems reproduce the very conditions that sustain literacy failure.

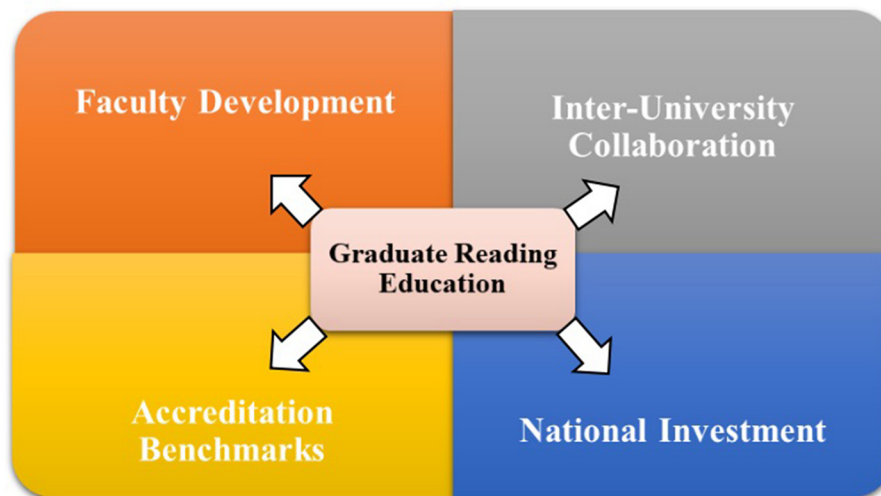


FIGURE 1

Future directions for strengthening graduate programs in Reading Education in the Philippines.

Graduate education sits at the center of this feedback loop: when it fails to produce credible Reading specialists, the system forfeits one of its primary mechanisms for interrupting intergenerational literacy inequities.

A second risk lies in student outcomes. Graduate students enter these programs expecting advanced training that confers disciplinary expertise. Too often, what they receive is a curriculum that only partially reflects the field (Jairam and Kahl, 2012). The consequences are practical and immediate: graduates may find themselves competing for professional and academic positions where deeper preparation is assumed, and their credentials may not withstand comparison with those of graduates from more established programs. The fairness of this exchange, with students investing time and resources in expertise they do not fully acquire, becomes open to question.

The implications, however, extend beyond individual graduates to the higher education system itself. When universities sustain programs without adequately Reading-trained faculty, they collectively weaken their capacity to contribute to the national literacy agenda. Preparing reading specialists requires alignment with updated professional standards that respond to the diverse needs of learners and changing educational contexts (Kern et al., 2018). High-quality professional development and teacher preparation in reading are not peripheral enhancements but essential mechanisms for student literacy success; without them, the proliferation of programs may represent superficial growth rather than meaningful reform (Rice et al., 2024). In this sense, the very crisis that Reading Education programs were meant to address remains insufficiently answered.

There is also the broader matter of public trust. If master's or doctoral degrees in Reading Education can be earned without rigorous disciplinary grounding, the credibility of those qualifications diminishes in the eyes of employers, policymakers, and academic peers (Campbell et al., 2018). Such erosion is not

confined to the field of Reading Education. It threatens confidence in graduate education more generally, undermining its reliability as a pathway to professional and scholarly expertise.

Finally, the Philippine case resonates with global patterns. Across contexts, graduate education has expanded faster than the growth of disciplinary expertise required to sustain it. The case of Reading Education thus functions as a microcosm of a wider structural dilemma: higher education systems worldwide struggle to reconcile the imperatives of access and expansion with the equally pressing demands of quality (Schendel and McCowan, 2016).

These risks underscore that the challenges facing graduate Reading Education are not just immediate concerns of program quality but indicators of what must change to secure the field's future. Addressing them requires deliberate strategies that move beyond critique toward building sustainability and legitimacy.

Future directions for graduate reading education in the Philippines

As shown in Figure 1, strengthening graduate programs in Reading Education requires sustained investment in faculty development. Scholarships that enable teachers to pursue advanced study in Reading Education, both locally and abroad, can expand the pool of future experts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Building research capacity through funded projects and dissertation grants can support individual faculty while enriching the intellectual foundation of the field. Without such measures, the shortage of Reading-trained faculty will continue to undermine not only the programs themselves but also the credibility of higher education's role in addressing the literacy crisis.

Collaboration across universities is another essential step. Established institutions could extend their reach by sharing

teaching loads, co-supervising theses, and appointing visiting professors. Digital platforms now allow Reading specialists in metropolitan centers to teach students in more remote campuses (Bippert et al., 2019). If these arrangements are formalized, expertise can be distributed more equitably, allowing smaller campuses to sustain programs without lowering standards. The promise here is not simply the preservation of fragile programs but the creation of a more integrated higher education system that treats expertise as a shared national resource.

Accreditation also demands recalibration. Regulators should enforce benchmarks that tie legitimacy to faculty expertise, ensuring that core courses are taught by Reading-trained faculty rather than by those from adjacent disciplines (Salto, 2022). Accreditation, in this sense, should function as a safeguard for disciplinary standards, not merely as a compliance ritual. By insisting on expertise, higher education can signal that program legitimacy is inseparable from academic rigor.

Finally, Reading Education must be recognized as a national investment. The literacy crisis is not only an educational challenge but also a barrier to economic growth, civic participation, and democratic life (Gatcho et al., 2024). Graduate programs that prepare Reading specialists form part of the infrastructure necessary to address this crisis. Placing Reading Education at the center of national higher education strategies will require political will, financial commitment, and recognition that disciplinary expertise is indispensable. Without this recognition, the paradox will persist: the country will continue to need Reading specialists yet lack the capacity to produce them.

Conclusion

Graduate Reading Education in the Philippines reveals a central disjuncture in higher education. The country urgently needs specialists to address its literacy crisis, yet many programs designed to produce them lack a stable base of Reading-trained faculty. Policy incentives reward expansion, institutional survival strategies prioritize visibility, and accreditation often functions more as a formality than a guarantor of rigor. The result is a paradox in which higher education carries the mandate to address the literacy crisis while lacking the capacity to fulfill it.

This paradox clarifies the path forward. Strengthening faculty capacity, fostering collaboration across institutions, enforcing accreditation standards, and treating Reading Education as a national priority are not only remedies for the field but reforms that can restore trust in graduate education as a legitimate track to expertise.

The Philippine case offers a cautionary lesson with international relevance. Across contexts, graduate programs in emerging or specialized fields often expand faster than the expertise needed to sustain them. By foregrounding Reading Education as a test case, this paper contributes to the comparative higher education research agenda by showing how systems worldwide confront tensions between program growth and disciplinary depth. It highlights the importance of linking program legitimacy, faculty capacity, and institutional safeguards to broader

debates on the role of higher education in addressing urgent social needs. Without such balance, higher education risks undermining its own purposes. With it, graduate Reading Education and similar programs worldwide can move from precarious survival to sustainable contribution.

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The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2026.1721429/full#supplementary-material>

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