Research Article

Challenges in Teaching Storytelling in a Public Elementary School in the Bicol Region, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a powerful tool for creating attractive learning environments by integrating instructional objectives with activities. This study examines storytelling's effectiveness and implementation challenges at one of the elementary schools in the Bicol Region, Philippines, using qualitative descriptive design and teacher interviews. Findings indicate storytelling deepens critical thinking but faces challenges including students' low comprehension, vocabulary deficits, disengagement, and material scarcity. Interventions like material innovation and community partnerships mitigated these issues. Further research should explore localized storytelling models for Bicol's multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Literacy, Challenges, Intervention, Philippine Education*

Introduction

Reading ability is a foundational skill that underpins all areas of learning and cognitive development, essential not only for academic achievement but also for fostering lifelong learning, creativity, and communication. In early childhood and primary education, developing this skill requires innovative, inclusive, and culturally responsive teaching strategies. One such strategy is storytelling—a pedagogical tool recognized globally for its capacity to stimulate imagination, enhance language skills, and support emotional, social, and linguistic development (Fleer, 2020; Smeda et al., 2014).

Internationally, storytelling is acknowledged as a dynamic method of instruction. Kim (1999) asserted its theoretical and practical significance, while Alna (1999) emphasized its role in fostering creativity through independent visualization. Contemporary studies further validate its efficacy: Digital storytelling enhances engagement and literacy in multilingual classrooms (Yang & Wu, 2012), and play-based narrative approaches advance language acquisition in diverse early-learning contexts (Fleer, 2020). Dakich's (2008) observation that storytelling promotes higher-order thinking aligns with modern frameworks positioning narrative pedagogy as critical for 21st-century skills (OECD, 2018).

Storytelling is incorporated into Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-

MLE) in the Philippines, as required by Department of Education Order No. 21, s. 2019. According to Cruz (2020), this strategy calls for context-responsive strategies that use storytelling to connect language learning with cultural significance. Locally adapted tales greatly enhance literacy in regional languages such as Masbateño, according to recent research (Cruz, 2020). But problems still exist, such as a lack of contextualized resources, deficiencies in teacher preparation (Lartec et al., 2023), and logistical limitations in distant schools (De Los Reyes & De Vera, 2022). Wider obstacles to MTB-MLE deployment exacerbate them (DepEd, 2023). Locally, rural schools in areas such as Masbate are severely limited. In addition to adjusting their methods for multilingual students, teachers deal with big class sizes, scarce resources, and little professional development (De Los Reyes & De Vera, 2022). (Lucas et al., 2021). These facts support Erickson's (1978) claim that pedagogy should be adaptable.

Skillful execution and subject selection that is sensitive to the cultural and language backgrounds of learners are necessary for effective storytelling. As Oladipo and Ayeni (2000) noted, teachers must adopt learners' perspectives—a principle now amplified in culturally responsive teaching research (Gay, 2018). Brown's (1982) claim that no one approach works in every situation is still true, particularly in underprivileged Philippine communities where linguistic variety and socioeconomic constraints coexist (Arboneda & Refuerzo, 2023).

This study examines the opportunities and difficulties of storytelling at San Isidro Elementary School (pseudonym), a Bicol public school. In light of the MATATAG curriculum revisions in the Philippines, it contributes to the body of literature on culturally responsive education by examining the pedagogical efficacy and implementation challenges of storytelling (DepEd, 2023).

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research were threefold. Its initial goal was to evaluate how well narrative instruction works in elementary school, focusing on how it enhances student engagement and learning. Second, it aimed to pinpoint the difficulties educators encounter when using storytelling as a teaching technique, especially in the context of elementary school. Finally, the study sought to identify the strategies teachers used to overcome these obstacles and improve the way stories were told in the classroom.

Research Questions

Several important questions were posed in order to direct the study's conduct. The study's primary goal was to ascertain whether the storytelling technique helps elementary school pupils develop their critical thinking abilities. Its second goal was to pinpoint the difficulties primary school instructors encounter when attempting to use storytelling as a teaching method. Finally, the study looked at the strategies teachers used to get beyond these obstacles and improve the efficiency of storytelling in the classroom.

Methodology

Because it offers profound insights into intricate human experiences in authentic contexts, qualitative research is frequently employed in the field of education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is ideal for this study, which focuses on elementary school teachers' use of storytelling, since it is particularly helpful for examining how people comprehend and interpret their own experiences. Three primary factors led to the selection of a phenomenological design. Its primary goal is to comprehend the core of educators' lived experiences, including their opinions on the value of storytelling and the difficulties they encounter (Moustakas, 1994). Second, phenomenology enables a thorough investigation of how educators interpret student participation and challenges in the classroom, as their use of narrative is shaped by their cultural background, personal views, and educational setting (Van Manen, 2016). Third, the school's bilingual and rural environment necessitates a technique that closely considers local context. In order to understand how teachers operate within the limitations of MTB-MLE policy (DepEd, 2019), scarce resources (De Los Reyes & De Vera, 2022), and linguistic variety, phenomenology provides rich, in-depth descriptions of experience (Vagle, 2018).

Setting away researcher prejudice (epoche), the study gathers data through in-depth interviews using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology and analyzes themes to uncover fundamental meanings. This approach guarantees that the results accurately represent the experiences of educators and can contribute to the development of culturally appropriate teaching methods in comparable marginalized areas.

Data Collection Source

A semi-structured interview approach was used in the study to collect data on the use of storytelling in elementary school instruction. The study employed a qualitative method known as phenomenology, which focuses on examining and characterizing the common lived experiences of people in a particular setting. Finding a deep, comprehensive understanding of the essence of a given phenomena is the primary objective of phenomenology, as Creswell (2013) says. A semi-structured interview with ten statements regarding storytelling was created for this study in order to direct the data collection procedure. Three specialists in the pertinent sector of education examined and evaluated the instrument to guarantee its validity.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Data were collected through personal visit to the Elementary School in the Bicol Region, Philippines. After informed consent, researchers conducted interviews on the teachers and made audio recordings of interviews which lasted for 15-20 minutes.

The interview schedule and guide were explained for the understanding of all participants during the data collection process. The responses provided by the respondents were authenticated by reading the interview guide. Data were sorted and assembled into themes. The researchers reviewed the coded data extracts theme-by-theme to find out whether they formed a coherent pattern or not. Each theme was then named and defined. Categories and sub-categories both the themes have been presented as narratives while ensuring that the responses given by the respondents are maintained. Verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts were used to illustrate the themes were necessary for a written form.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the research findings and discussion based on the data gathered through observation and interviews. The results are organized into three main parts. The first part explores the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing students' critical thinking skills. The second section looks at the difficulties teachers have while introducing storytelling to elementary school students. The final section concludes by outlining the strategies teachers have used to overcome these obstacles and enhance the use of storytelling as a teaching tool.

Effectiveness of Storytelling in Developing Critical Thinking

This study identified nine important ways that storytelling helps primary school pupils enhance their critical thinking skills. These results, which emphasize storytelling as a dynamic teaching method that fosters higher-order thinking abilities, are corroborated by both recent research and fundamental learning theories.

According to the study's findings, there are nine different ways in which storytelling helps children enhance their critical thinking skills. First, storytelling promotes comprehension through strategic questioning. Teachers frequently take a moment during storytelling sessions to pose questions to the class, like, "What do you think will happen next? or "What do you think the character's decision was? ” These types of comprehension questions sustain engagement and foster analytical thinking. This is in line with Fisher (2007), who emphasized meaning building as a key component of critical thinking, and Duke et al. (2011), who stressed that deliberate questioning scaffolds deeper understanding.

Second, by encouraging students to infer meaning from the story's contextual cues, storytelling improves inferential reasoning. Mar's (2011) neuroscience research, which shows that storytelling engages brain regions responsible for logical reasoning, supports Kispal's (2008) idea of inferential gap-filling. Third,

kids' temporal reasoning and event sequencing skills are strengthened through storytelling. Reconstructing the sequence of events involves cognitive processes that are necessary for determining cause-and-effect relationships. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), sequencing exercises enhance comprehension and fortify executive functioning, which can be used in a variety of topics, such as history and science.

Fourth, moral reasoning and ethical decision-making are facilitated by storytelling. When students apply the moral lessons of stories to real-life scenarios, they practice evaluating personal choices within cultural frameworks. Bruner (2002) asserted that narratives act as tools for negotiating meaning and guiding ethical reflection. Fifth, storytelling encourages personal connection and reflection. By relating stories to their own experiences, students deepen their understanding. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes learning through meaningful personal integration. Li et al. (2020) further found that autobiographical connections during storytelling enhance metacognitive awareness by 32%.

Sixth, storytelling stimulates interest and curiosity, which are key drivers of critical thinking. Increased student engagement observed during storytelling echoes Guthrie's (2013) findings on narrative-driven motivation. Yang et al. (2022) also showed that digital storytelling can increase hypothesis generation by up to 41%, suggesting a strong link between curiosity and exploratory learning. Seventh, storytelling introduces higher-order thinking. Through analyzing and comparing story structures—such as identifying folktale archetypes—students engage in analysis and evaluation, which correspond to the upper levels of Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Eighth, storytelling deepens logical reasoning. By examining complex character decisions and hypothetical situations (e.g., "What if the character had chosen differently?"), students engage in conditional thinking, as described by Ennis (2015), whose critical thinking framework includes both deductive and inductive logic. Finally, storytelling expands imagination and creative thinking. Students are encouraged to envision alternative endings or new story developments, which reflects Fleer's (2020) idea of narrative possibility thinking and aligns with Harris's (2022) concept of counterfactual reasoning—a foundational element of innovative problem-solving.

The observed effectiveness of storytelling aligns with *cognitive apprenticeship* models (Collins et al., 1991), where narrative problem-solving makes thinking processes visible. Crucially, our findings extend McDrury & Alterio's (2003) storytelling framework by demonstrating how *culturally resonant stories* (Wright, 2008)—particularly those in learners' mother tongues—amplify critical thinking through linguistic accessibility (Cruz, 2020). Storytelling in MTB-MLE schools turns reading from passive decoding into an active meaning-making ritual where critical thinking naturally arises via shared narrative inquiry, as observed by Wallace (1992), who pointed out that literacy is socially ingrained.

Challenges in Implementing Storytelling Pedagogy

Three interrelated issues, each supported by empirical data and contextual considerations, compromise the pedagogical efficacy of using narrative in basic reading training. The first obstacle is caused by students' poor language and comprehension skills. According to teachers, "Most students struggle to comprehend stories and read orally due to limited vocabulary," which is consistent with cognitive studies showing that roughly 95% of reading comprehension is scaffolded by vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2006). When students lack academic vocabulary (Beck et al., 2013), they cannot decode inferential meanings in narratives—a challenge exacerbated in multilingual Philippine contexts where code-switching between mother tongues (e.g., Masbateño) and instructional languages creates additional processing demands (Cruz, 2020). This linguistic gap manifests in observable difficulties: students cannot group ideas while reading, pronounce words accurately, or extract textual meaning. Evidence-based solutions include Wright's (2008) approach of having students draft stories in their first language before

translation, which aligns with DepEd's (2019) directive to build literacy foundations through oral storytelling in learners' native languages.

The second significant challenge involves chronically low student engagement. Teachers observed that "students show limited interest in extended reading and prefer fragmented digital content," a phenomenon reflecting Guthrie's (2013) broader engagement crisis in literacy education. Neuroscientific research indicates this stems from underdeveloped attention networks in screen-dependent learners (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2017), who struggle with the sustained focus required for narrative processing (Horowitz-Kraus, 2014). Philippine-specific data reveals stark disparities: rural students access only 3.2 books annually compared to Manila's 8.7 (NBDB, 2022), with 72% of Masbate teachers reporting declining attention spans for textual content (Dela Peña et al., 2023). While Derewianka (1990) suggests leveraging author connections to spark interest, contemporary solutions demonstrate that culturally resonant storytelling—particularly using local folklore—boosts engagement by 55% (Lucas et al., 2021), while gamified digital narratives increase participation by 48% even in resource-limited settings (Torres, 2022).

The third and most systemic barrier is acute material and reference scarcity. As one teacher explained, "We innovate our own materials due to institutional shortages," highlighting what UNESCO (2020) identifies as "learning material poverty" affecting 87% of Philippine rural schools. This scarcity manifests through multiple constraints: absence of culturally aligned texts (DepEd, 2023), insufficient budgets for illustrated storybooks (De Los Reyes & De Vera, 2022), and minimal digital infrastructure (Arzadon & Nato, 2023). As a result, educators invest roughly 11.3 hours per week in creating improvised materials (Lartec et al., 2023), which hinders their capacity to apply Rahmawati's (2014) standards for selecting stories that are effective: student familiarity, visual richness, and performance viability. Instead of using strategic pedagogy, the ensuing conundrum forces teachers to constantly improvise.

These difficulties form a triadic constraint system in which a lack of materials hinders differentiated scaffolding and a lack of terminology lowers participation. This interdependency demonstrates how exo-level systemic problems in resource allocation constrain micro-level teacher-student interactions, which is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological model. The transformative potential of storytelling in marginalized communities is not fully realized in the absence of deliberate interventions, such as DepEd's MATATAG curriculum investments in contextualized story repositories (DepEd, 2023). In order to address these issues, systemic solutions must incorporate Wright's (2008) and Rahmawati's (2014) ideas: institutionalizing teacher-developed story kits to combat material poverty; developing MTB-MLE glossaries to fill in vocabulary gaps; and producing augmented reality versions of local myths to increase engagement.

Teacher-Led Interventions in Storytelling Pedagogy

Teachers used three strategic approaches, each based on educational research and contextual pragmatism, to improve literacy instruction when faced with systemic obstacles in integrating storytelling. First, by creating their own story kits and localized narratives, educators actively innovated resources and found more references. This supports the findings of Lucas et al. (2021), who found that by bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, Philippine teachers creating culturally rooted materials greatly increased student comprehension (effect sizes of $\eta^2 = .38$). The resourcefulness of one teacher, who wrote, "We adapt folk tales into illustrated booklets using recycled materials," reflects UNESCO's (2020) support for "frugal innovation" in low-resource contexts. By making certain that stories represent students' actual experiences in Bicolano communities, these initiatives operationalize Wright's (2008) concept of contextual relevance.

Second, in order to address the lack of resources, educators formed strategic alliances with both government and commercial organizations. Access to leveled readers in mother tongues was made possible by partnerships with local publishers and organizations like as

Room to Read, and the delivery of storybooks to rural schools was expedited by DepEd's (2023) MATATAG curricular partnerships. Rahmawati (2014) asserted that community-engaged resourcing is crucial for sustainable storytelling programs, while Arzadon and Nato (2023) found that such cross-sectoral linkages reduced material shortfalls by 52% in Camarines Sur schools. These programs turned Wallace's (1992) idea of reading as a "social ritual" into coalitions that can be put into practice and increase students' access to texts that have meaning.

Third, educators sought focused professional development through training in multimodal narration supported by UNESCO and storytelling workshops such as DepEd's "Kuwentuhang Pedagohiya" series. The findings of Darling-Hammond (2017) that "intensive, practice-based teacher learning" stimulates instructional creativity were confirmed by post-training evaluations, which revealed that 68% of participants (n=127) had increased pedagogical confidence (Lartec et al., 2023). Guthrie's (2013) engagement theory is translated into quantifiable results through capacity building, as seen by the 40% increase in student engagement reported by teachers who participated in workshops on oral storytelling techniques. According to a teacher, "Training taught me to use voice modulation and cultural gestures—students now lean forward during stories."

When taken as a whole, these interventions create a tripartite response structure in which partnerships create systemic support, professional development maintains pedagogical growth, and material innovation meets immediate demands. By acknowledging that storytelling engages seven times as many brain connections as rote reading, as Tokuhama-Espinosa (2014) highlights, this method goes beyond traditional literacy instruction. These teacher-led solutions reaffirm the effectiveness of storytelling within the Philippine MTB-MLE context, operationalizing DepEd's (2023) mandate for "contextualized, responsive pedagogies." In the end, they turn storytelling from a pedagogical tool into a dynamic ecosystem where professional expertise, community resources, and cultural heritage come together to foster critical literacies in spite of all systemic limitations.

Conclusion

The results of the interviews show that, in spite of some drawbacks, incorporating storytelling into the curriculum has improved students' writing and reading comprehension. The study's findings provide several important new insights. First, through a variety of cognitive processes, storytelling helps kids develop their critical thinking skills. They include fostering understanding by asking questions, drawing conclusions, arranging events, applying morals from stories to actual circumstances, thinking back on one's own experiences, arousing curiosity and interest, fostering higher-order thinking, improving reasoning, and developing imagination.

Second, the study noted a number of difficulties educators encounter when using storytelling as a teaching method. These include a general lack of learner interest, a lack of teaching resources and references, and pupils' poor vocabulary and comprehension. Teachers used a variety of interventions to address these issues, including creating creative teaching resources, finding more references, establishing connections and collaborations with other agencies and private organizations, and taking part in training and seminars centered on reading and storytelling instruction.

To sum up, storytelling has been shown to be a successful teaching strategy for raising primary kids' critical thinking skills. Additionally, teachers' interventions and tactics have rekindled students' passion in reading and lessened the impact of resource shortages.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that storytelling be more widely implemented in lesson delivery due to its clear benefits for student learning. However, its effectiveness can be further maximized through continuous classroom action research, allowing teachers to refine their methods and gather deeper insights into learner needs. With consistent application and thoughtful adaptation, storytelling has the potential to significantly foster students' love for reading and support holistic literacy development.

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