

ECOLOGICAL LITERACY TRANSITIONING: A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR BRIDGING EARLY DECODING AND DISCIPLINARY COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This study developed a localized instructional framework designed to bridge the gap between basic decoding skills and disciplinary comprehension among Grade 4 learners in the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Nueva Ecija. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach grounded in "ecological literacy," the research explored how the integration of agricultural and communal "funds of knowledge" facilitates the pivotal shift toward complex meaning-making in Science and Social Studies. Data was gathered through purposive sampling of 32 participants, including eight Master Teachers and 24 Grade 4 students. Instrumentation involved semi-structured interviews, classroom observation protocols, focus group

discussions, and document analysis of student artifacts. Thematic analysis, following the Braun & Clarke framework, revealed that the Contextualization of Instruction and Cultural Bridging are foundational to student success. Qualitative findings indicated that while teachers excel at established "Home-School Connections" and "Relational Meaning-Making," they face significant resource constraints. Quantitative results corroborated these themes, yielding a high overall mean for Academic Identity Development ($M=4.21$) and a Pedagogical Shift toward Cultural Responsiveness ($M=4.28$). The results highlighted that students feel most empowered when their background is validated ($M=4.35$), though they still struggle with the technical demands of complex texts ($M=4.05$). The study concluded that literacy is a socio-cultural practice where relationality acts as the engine for cognition. The resulting "Ecological Literacy Transitioning" framework suggests that the "fourth-grade slump" can be mitigated through transitioning from purely "relational" teaching to "technical" culturally responsive scaffolding. Recommendations include the institutionalization of localized materials and professional development focused on bridging vernacular knowledge with disciplinary academic language to ensure sustainable academic growth in the heartland of Central Luzon.

Keywords: Ecological Literacy Transitioning, Early Decoding, Disciplinary Comprehension

Introduction

The process from early decoding to the development of disciplinary comprehension was, in essence, controlled by the interplay between the foundational skills and socio-cultural settings of the learners. Previous studies had already proven that, although early decoding skills provided a foundational basis for literacy, they did not, by themselves, provide the depth and complexity that was needed to access the higher, more complex processes of meaning-making. The Four-Dimensional Ecology Education (4DEE) model had already pointed to the fact that the learners often failed to synthesize the different dimensions of learning, such as ecological concepts and human-environment interactions, to form a coherent whole (Woods et al., 2025).

The role of word knowledge and morphological awareness was identified as a critical predictor of the process of transition across different linguistic contexts. In the case of second language learners, the study established the significant contribution of morphological awareness and word knowledge to the processes of decoding and listening comprehension, which predicted long-term reading success (Xie et al., 2024). Derivational

and inflectional morphological awareness was observed to have unique direct effects on the process of reading comprehension, which indicated the significance of the ability to recognize how words were constructed to bypass the cognitive demands of decoding unfamiliar disciplinary words (Xie & Yeung, 2024). These studies emphasized the importance of the incorporation of word knowledge in the early stages of the "learning to read" process to avoid comprehension difficulties.

Standardized models of reading, such as the Simple View of Reading (SVR), were also commonly used to examine reader profiles and specific deficits. A study on ninth-grade readers demonstrated a range of reader profiles, from "top readers" to "poor comprehenders" with average decoding skills but without linguistic comprehension skills necessary for academic achievement (Shi & Lee, 2025). This was also related to external ecological factors, such as parental education levels and literacy resource availability, which emphasized the idea of literacy as an ecological process rather than a cognitive one. Additionally, in a study using Spanish, which is a phonologically transparent orthography, linguistic comprehension was found to be a more significant predictor of unique variance in reading comprehension than decoding skills, which emphasized the idea that the "rules" of reading change as students' progress through different stages of development.

Cultural "funds of knowledge" were also identified as a highly effective yet underused strategy to narrow the gap between the home and the school setting. Research conducted in rural Tanzania indicated the positive effects of culturally responsive instruction (CRI) on the creation of inclusive classrooms using native language, indigenous stories, and local texts to promote learning (Amani & Mgaiwa, 2025). However, the tension surrounding the assessment of the linguistic strengths of the marginalized student was evident when teachers misinterpreted the dialectical features of the Black English speakers because of their assimilation ideology (Elzy-Palmer, 2025). This emphasized the necessity to train teachers to become linguistically and culturally responsive to the idea that the student's home literacy was a strength rather than a weakness to the student's disciplinary learning.

Similarly, cognitive skills like verbal working memory and visual search skills also contributed to a student's ability to comprehend text in unique ways. For Chinese-speaking children, working memory ability contributed to their ability to comprehend text through their ability to linguistically comprehend text; however, decoding ability was a mediator of the effect of visual search skills on text comprehension. This showed that the development of complex reading skills was facilitated by a wide range of domain-general cognitive abilities. Additionally, the role of inferencing was highlighted as an essential but neglected skill in early reading

development; however, a new framework known as BUILD was proposed to integrate background knowledge and verbal reasoning skills in daily teaching to help children progress beyond decoding to actual meaning-making skills (O'Sullivan, 2026).

Moreover, longitudinal data provided further insight into the importance of precursory skills, including phonological awareness and letter knowledge, as foundational skills in early reading development, while oral language abilities and vocabulary became more important as students progressed to higher grade levels (Ehm et al., 2023; Tselekidou et al., 2026). For diglossic language speakers, such as Arabic speakers, vernacular language skills, including morphological awareness and receptive vocabulary, emerged as significant predictors of reading comprehension in the standard language (Saiegh-Haddad & Schiff, 2025), further supporting the notion of the vernacular as the primary basis of formal literacy development. While the advent of technologies such as AI redefined higher-level education, the importance of inclusive approaches was still at the forefront of navigating the changing landscape of digital literacy (Allen & Nakonechnyi, 2025).

Lastly, the researcher found that recent pedagogical approaches, such as "reading while listening," did not always produce the desired results in terms of comprehension, suggesting a lack of clear theoretical understanding of the effects of different modes of input on intermediate-

and advanced-level learners (Hui & Godfroid, 2026). Phonological decoding was still one of the most important aspects of fluency and comprehension among beginning readers with disabilities in highly transparent orthographies, as was the case in Turkish (Guldenoglu et al., 2024). All of these findings seemed to indicate that while the science of reading provided the "map" of the various aspects of cognition, the "ecological" and "culturally responsive" aspects provided the necessary compass for navigating the various student needs in local school divisions, such as SDO Nueva Ecija.

The researcher recognized a critical gap between the basic mechanics of reading and the complex cognitive processes involved in disciplinary literacy within the context of SDO Nueva Ecija. The literature, although extensive in its documentation of the cognitive processes involved in the "Simple View of Reading" (e.g., decoding and linguistic comprehension, Ortiz-Villalobos et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025), still did not address the process by which these processes would be transferred to "ecological literacy" and the ability to function within a given environmental and scientific domain. The researcher noticed that most of the literature focused on the acquisition of literacy within a monolingual and bilingual context in Western and urbanized environments, leaving the rural, agricultural, and culturally distinct "funds of knowledge" untapped within the context of Nueva Ecija.

The need for this study was further justified by the phenomenon of the "fourth-grade slump," wherein children who had successfully mastered basic decoding skills suddenly began to falter when confronted with the abstract and specialized language of subjects like Science and Social Studies. The researcher further noted that although morphological and vocabulary skills were established as strong predictors of success (Xie et al., 2024; Saiegh-Haddad & Schiff, 2025), there was a glaring lack of research on how teachers could bridge the gap between a student's home-based vernacular, and the rigorous "abjad" demands of the classroom. Without a culturally responsive bridge, children from diverse linguistic backgrounds within this division were at risk of being mislabeled with a reading deficit rather than a lack of contextual scaffolding to apply their existing skills to a more school-based task set (Elzy-Palmer, 2025).

Moreover, the researcher saw a systemic lack of models of instruction that combined high leverage practices with ecological education. While the 4DEE approach provided a multi-dimensional approach to ecology, the results of its application indicated that students had difficulty synthesizing concepts without the actual practice of combining them (Woods et al., 2025). This research fills the systemic lack by offering a framework that did not simply add "culture" as a superficial layer but used it as the very "ecology" in which literacy was developed. Through the actual experiences of the students of SDO Nueva Ecija, the researcher hoped to find the actual

"remixing" of literacy programs (Reichenberg et al., 2025) necessary to create a sense of academic identity and meaning-making that felt authentic to the learners' environment.

Ultimately, the basis of this research was grounded in the need for pedagogical changes that transcend the "one-size-fits-all" phonetic approach. The rationale of the research was since if the transition from decoding to comprehension was going to be a successful one, it was necessary to transcend the "Simple View" of reading comprehension and adopt a more holistic "Ecological Literacy" approach, including verbal reasoning, background knowledge, and the BUILD approach (O'Sullivan, 2026). The research was undertaken to develop a localized evidence-based model of instruction for SDO Nueva Ecija, one in which the transition from decoding to disciplinary reading was not a barrier but a culturally sustaining step towards academic maturity

Research Objectives

The research questions the researcher developed to effectively examine the complex process of moving from basic literacy to disciplinary learning within the distinctive socio-cultural context of SDO Nueva Ecija can be summarized as follows:

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

How do teachers describe the process of integrating cultural "funds of knowledge" into disciplinary literacy instruction?

What lived experiences characterize the students' transition from basic decoding to complex disciplinary comprehension?

In what ways does the use of the culturally responsive framework influence the students' sense of academic identity and meaning making?

What framework can be proposed based on the results of the study?

What pedagogical shifts are observed when teachers bridge the gap between home-based literacy and school-based disciplinary demands?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

In this study, the researcher was able to set the boundaries of the research through the specification of the stage of the literacy development process in the public elementary schools of SDO Nueva Ecija. The study was prioritized to focus on the experiences of the Grade 4 students and their respective Master Teachers, as the stage is considered the "pivotal shift" from the concrete to the abstract demands of the discipline-specific comprehension processes. The researcher observed that the specification of the participants to a particular demographic was able to highlight the "fourth-grade slump" as well as the necessary shifts to meet the demands of the discipline-specific subjects such as Science and Social Studies.

In terms of its geographical scope, the research was limited to specific districts within the SDO Nueva Ecija, which represented a variety of socio-economic settings ranging from agricultural to semi-urban settings. The researcher saw the importance of this place in relation to the "Ecological Literacy" concept, as the students' "funds of knowledge" at home are closely associated with the province's claim of being the "Rice Granary of the Philippines." Thus, by limiting the research to this division, the researcher was able to ensure that the proposed instructional framework was highly contextualized and relevant to the specific linguistic and cultural nuances of the Central Luzon region, rather than attempting a generalized approach that could have compromised the qualitative nature of the research itself.

In terms of content, the study was delimited to the intersection of literacy and disciplinary meaning-making, specifically examining how culturally responsive pedagogy influences academic identity. The researcher did not aim to evaluate the entire DepEd K-12 curriculum, but rather focused on the "bridge" between early reading mechanics and high-level inferencing. The investigation was further limited to qualitative data collection through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, focusing on the "lived experiences" and "descriptions" provided by the participants. Consequently, the findings were intended to provide deep, narrative insights rather than statistically generalizable data across the entire national educational system.

The researcher identified several inherent limitations, particularly the reliance on self-reported data from teachers and students. Since the study explored "perceptions" of academic identity and "descriptions" of instructional processes, the results were subject to the participants' subjective interpretations and their willingness to share candid professional or personal reflections. While the researcher employed member checking to enhance the "trustworthiness" of the data, the findings remained a reflection of the specific social and professional dynamics present within the participating school sites at the time of the study.

Furthermore, the researcher recognized the fact that the "ecological" nature of the research meant that the results were "deeply embedded" in the local culture of the Nueva Ecija region. Although this was a strength of the division, it was also a weakness about the "transferability" of the instructional framework to other regions with vastly different cultural or linguistic "funds of knowledge." The researcher concluded that although the process of creating a culturally responsive bridge was unique, the actual content of the framework was uniquely tailored to the learners of the SDO Nueva Ecija region as a model of reform.

Methods

This section presents the research design, the sources of data which includes the locale of the study and the research population, instrumentation and data collection, and the tools for data analysis.

Research Design

To answer the inquiry about the way in which cultural assets were integrated within the classroom setting, the researcher engaged in a series of interviews and observations with Master Teachers. This allowed the researcher to gain insight into the way in which teachers recognized a particular set of "funds of knowledge" within their students' households and to consider the ways in which these were integrated within a more localized approach to teaching and learning. This qualitative engagement with teachers facilitated an understanding of the logic and reflections that informed teachers' transitions away from a more standardized approach to teaching and learning.

About the exploration of the student experience as they navigated the progression from basic reading skills to more abstract understanding, the researcher used focus group discussions and narrative reflection. This would allow the students to express themselves and share their individual experiences, focusing on the points at which they struggled or succeeded as they worked through the specialized language. When using first-person experiences, the researcher was able to pinpoint the precise "hinge points"

in the curriculum at which the students became disenfranchised by the reading or empowered by the connection to their agrarian society.

To assess the impact of this instructional framework on learners' sense of self and ability to make meaning, the researcher examined student work samples and journals. This longitudinal examination of student production served to provide a concrete evidence base to illustrate the impact of the inclusion of these familiar cultural hooks on facilitating more inferencing and a stronger academic voice. The researcher examined student patterns of utilizing their "vernacular" knowledge to make sense of and synthesize "disciplinary" knowledge, thereby creating a narrative evidence base to illustrate the effectiveness of this ecological approach.

Sources of Data

The researcher identified the primary sources of data for the study as the direct, first-hand information/data provided by the Master Teachers and Grade 4 students in SDO Nueva Ecija. To gather the pedagogical aspects of the literacy transition, the researcher adopted semi-structured interview guides as the primary instrument of data collection. The interview guides enabled the researcher to gather in-depth information from the teachers regarding their internal processes of choice in selecting "funds of knowledge" to bridge the space between vernacular/home language and disciplinary language.

In addition to the above tools, the researcher made use of observation protocols to collect primary data pertaining to the actual implementation of the culturally responsive framework. This tool was a primary record of the actual "pedagogical shifts" taking place in the classroom with regards to the interactions between the teacher's local strategies and the students' engagement with the texts in the disciplines of Science and Social Studies. When recording the actual observable behaviors taking place in the classrooms, the researcher was able to collect primary data pertaining to the actual implementation of ecological literacy in the classrooms of the division.

To access the experiences and the processes of making sense by the learners, the researcher used focus group discussion guides that were prepared specifically for Grade 4 learners. This gave the learners a space to share their experiences regarding the transition from basic decoding skills to complex reading comprehension. The main data obtained through the discussion gave the researcher a rare inside view on how the learners' experiences with the incorporation of familiar cultural hooks impacted their academic identity and the ability to cope with the specialized vocabulary used in the subjects.

Furthermore, the researcher employed a document analysis checklist to assess the student-produced artifacts, which included reflective journals and disciplinary work samples. This primary source of data offered the

researcher physical evidence of the "meaning making" process as it actually transpired throughout the course of the instructional period. Through an analysis of the student reflections and academic products, the researcher could monitor the progression of the students' skill set in synthesizing their agricultural and communal backgrounds with the more abstract demands of the school curriculum.

The researcher was able to conclude that these primary sources of information, gathered through a rigorous set of qualitative research instruments, helped ensure that the research was kept grounded in the genuine voices of SDO Nueva Ecija. The direct interviews, observations, and student voices helped facilitate a "thick description" of the ecological literacy transition without the influence of secondary or translated sources of information. This data-driven approach was necessary to develop a localized instructional framework that truly meets the needs of the learner in Central Luzon.

Locale of the Study

The researcher identified the Schools Division Office (SDO) of Nueva Ecija as the primary locale for this investigation, a setting that provides a uniquely fertile ground for exploring the intersection of ecological literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy. As the largest province in Central Luzon and famously recognized as the "Rice Granary of the Philippines," Nueva Ecija offers a socio-cultural landscape deeply rooted in agrarian

traditions and environmental cycles. The researcher observes that this agricultural identity is not merely an economic backdrop but a foundational "ecology" that shapes the linguistic and cognitive schemas of the learners residing within its diverse municipalities.

The researcher was particularly interested in public elementary schools in the division where farming and local trade are the primary modes of existence. This was a deliberate choice of location as it enabled the research to tap into the rich "funds of knowledge" that students bring from their households into the classroom environment. The researcher adds that the linguistic environment in SDO Nueva Ecija is one where there is a combination of Tagalog and local vernaculars, offering a complex linguistic landscape for teachers who are required to bridge the divide between home-based communication and the specific language of school-based disciplines.

Furthermore, the educational setting of the SDO Nueva Ecija is marked by the presence of a good network of Master Teachers and instructional leaders who are being challenged to localize the national curriculum. The researcher observed that the schools in the division face the challenge of the "fourth-grade slump," particularly in the Philippine setting where the instructional materials do not always mirror the rural setting of the students. When situating the research in the setting described above, the researcher aims to respond to the learning needs of a student population whose

meaning-making is closely related to the land, the seasons, and the wisdom of the community of farmers.

SDO Nueva Ecija constitutes a critical 'bounded system' in which the development from early decoding to disciplinary comprehension is shaped by the individual's sense of place. The choice of the site guarantees that the proposed framework for instruction is not merely an idealistic theory of education, but a practical and relevant solution to the complex environmental and cultural variables of the region. The site-specific focus guaranteed that the study had a strong impact on the stakeholders of the division and demonstrate the potential for promoting ecological literacy by honoring the heritage of the heartland of Central Luzon."

Population Sampling

The researcher recognized Purposive Sampling as the major method for sampling the respondents, whereby the respondents were ensured to have the lived experiences and professional expertise required to address the issue of the ecological literacy transition. This non-probability sampling method enabled the researcher to sample the respondents who were "information-rich" regarding the issue of the transition from basic decoding skills to the comprehension of the discipline. When sampling the respondents who were directly immersed in the Grade 4 "pivotal shift" in SDO Nueva Ecija, the researcher ensured that the data obtained was relevant to the socio-cultural goals of the study.

To establish the researcher's choice of participants among the educators, the researcher set specific criteria based on which the educators had to be Master Teachers with at least five years of experience in teaching literacy or science-based intermediate-level courses. The researcher observed that the role of Master Teachers in the division is to act as instructional leaders with a highly developed understanding of how to "remix" and localize the curriculum. A manageable sample size of eight Master Teachers from different districts in SDO Nueva Ecija was established as sufficient to achieve thematic saturation and allow for a deep dive into the pedagogical shifts and "funds of knowledge" without overwhelming the qualitative analysis.

In the case of the student participants, the researcher adopted a Criterion-Based Selection method, where Grade 4 students who were amid making the transition into specialized disciplinary texts were targeted by the researcher. The researcher was able to target a manageable number of twenty-four student participants, who formed three focus groups of eight participants each, who would be part of the narrative sessions. The students were chosen based on the classrooms they were in, as they were taught by the Master Teachers who participated in the study.

The researcher was able to conclude that "this specific sampling of thirty-two individuals, eight of whom are expert practitioners and twenty-four of whom are transitional learners, provided a rich yet manageable

foundation for the study." The sampling method was based on the principle of "quality over quantity," as it focused more on the qualitative nature of the narrative rather than the quantitative results. As the researcher focused more specifically on the individuals within the division, it was possible to develop a "thick description" of the ecological literacy transition, as it was both authentic and professional in nature.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The group of thirty-two individuals, consisting of eight expert practitioners and twenty-four transitional learners, offered a strong and manageable foundation for this research. This sampling approach emphasized a focus on "quality over quantity" and concentrated on the qualitative narrative rather than a statistical approach. Focusing on these individuals within this division allowed the researcher to create a "thick description" of this transition in ecological literacy that was authentic to this locale and professional in nature.

The first instrument included in this study was the Master Teacher Semi-Structured Interview Protocol, which emphasized the role of the educator as a "culture broker." This instrument was used by the researcher to elicit information from teachers on their strategies for incorporating local agricultural and community knowledge bases within their discipline-specific literacy instruction. This instrument provided the researcher with

insight into the professional logic behind the "remixing" of conventional reading programs to accommodate a unique environment in Central Luzon.

The second part of the tool was the Ecological Literacy Classroom Observation Rubric. This tool offered a framework to document the real-time shift from decoding to comprehension. The researcher used the tool to track the frequency and type of culturally responsive teaching cues, such as the use of native language discourse or local ecological examples, used during the instruction of the Science and Social Studies curriculum. This part of the tool was crucial in collecting primary data regarding the real pedagogical shifts happening in the classroom, rather than relying on the stories that were being narrated.

The third and final part of the instrument was the Student Meaning-Making and Identity Reflection Guide, which was applied to the focus group setting as well as the analysis of the student artifacts. The researcher applied the Student Meaning-Making and Identity Reflection Guide to encourage discussion with the Grade 4 students to help them explain how the integration of their familiar "funds of knowledge" impacted their ability to deal with the complex disciplinary texts. This instrument was designed to measure changes in academic identity as the student moved from a passive decoder of symbols to an active and empowered meaning maker in their ecological setting.

The researcher adopted a strict data collection process that started with seeking official and technical clearance from the Schools Division Office of Nueva Ecija. After gaining access to the locale, a series of orientation meetings with the eight Master Teachers was undertaken to ensure a general level of understanding and orientation on the ecological nature of the study. The data collection and observation phases were implemented simultaneously over a four-week period to allow for an immediate contextualization of data gathered from the instructional meetings through the teachers' professional reflections.

The researcher concluded the data collection process by facilitating the student focus groups and collecting the learning artifacts for the purpose of data analysis. During this period, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to capture the intricacies of the "pivotal shift" process, especially as it occurred within the context of the rural classroom. The systematic use of the multi-part instrument guaranteed the final data set would be comprehensive and embedded within the "lived experiences" of the participants, thus providing a strong data set for the proposed instructional framework.

Tools for Data Analysis

The researcher applied Thematic Analysis as the fundamental tool used in the processing of the qualitative data collected from the primary sources in SDO Nueva Ecija. This tool is used to examine and report the data

regarding "themes" contained in the data set, which is more than an explanation of the data collected from the participants but an interpretation of the process of ecological literacy. The researcher noted that, being purely qualitative and phenomenological in nature, it did not use statistical formulas, p-value, or statistical assumption tests such as normality and homoscedasticity. Instead, it used the "tools" of rigorous data transformation into an instructional framework.

The researcher adhered to the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun & Clarke. In the first phase of familiarization with the data, the researcher underwent a series of readings of the Master Teacher interviews and the student focus group discussions. In this phase, the researcher became familiar with the "lived experiences" of the participants. At the same time, the researcher underwent "active reading" of the data, making initial observations about the "use of funds of knowledge" in bridging the gap between "home-based vernacular" and "disciplinary academic language." This phase is of great significance in laying the foundation for the "pivotal shift" observed in the Grade 4 classrooms of the division.

The second phase is the generation of initial codes, wherein the researcher used shorthand codes to label segments of the text that he or she deems relevant to the research. For instance, segments that referred to the teacher's use of local farming metaphors to explain biological cycles will

have the label "Ecological Scaffolding," whereas segments that refer to the students' comfort level in using their native language to engage in science discussions will have the label "Linguistic Validation." The researcher then labeled these codes as the foundation upon which the research will offer a detailed examination of the "pedagogical shifts" and the "meaning making" processes.

The third and fourth phases involved searching for and reviewing themes, in which a series of codes are brought together to form a more general candidate theme. The researcher found out that a series of codes, such as "local metaphors," "vernacular discourse," and "community storytelling," all cluster together to form a central theme of "Culturally Responsive Bridging." In reviewing these candidate themes, the researcher also compared them to the whole data set to ensure that they accurately reflect the "funds of knowledge" and "academic identity" that were discussed in the data. This process prevented an imposition of extrinsic theoretical biases on the authentic voices of the learners and educators.

In the fifth and sixth phases, the researcher focused on defining and naming the themes, as well as creating the final report, which eventually results in the development of the "Ecological Literacy Transitioning" framework. Each of the themes is defined as it relates to the importance of the transition from decoding to disciplinary comprehension, as well as making the connection back to the conceptual and theoretical foundations

of the research itself. The researcher argued that this thematic analysis is akin to a qualitative formula for synthesis, as the interaction between cultural assets (C) and pedagogical shifts (P) results in the development of disciplinary meaning-making (M), as conceptually represented as:

$M = f(C, P)$ where M (Meaning-Making) is a function of the integration of C (Cultural Funds of Knowledge) and P (Pedagogical Shifts) in the ecological context of the learner.

The researcher concluded the analysis with the "Trustworthiness Tests" of the qualitative data, which is the qualitative equivalent of the assumption tests used in quantitative data. This included Credibility (which the researcher ensures through member checking), Transferability (which the researcher ensured through thick description of the locale of Nueva Ecija), Dependability (which the researcher ensures through a clear audit trail of the coding process), and Confirmability (which the researcher ensures through a reflexive journal). This comprehensive method of analysis ensured that the resulting framework is not only locally relevant but also theoretically rich and empirically sound.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher recognized that the study of young learners and the sensitive "funds of knowledge" of rural communities demands a rigorous yet empathetic code of ethics. The primary concern was obtaining Informed Consent from the Master Teachers and Informed Parental Consent from all

the Grade 4 learners in the study area. The researcher made sure that the forms were translated into the vernacular language of the community to ensure that the parents of SDO Nueva Ecija fully understood the nature of the "Ecological Literacy" study, the voluntary participation of the learners, and the right of the parents to pull out their child at any time without any prejudice or penalty in terms of academics or social status.

To ensure the psychological well-being of the children during the focus group discussions and the narrative interviews, the researcher obtained the Learner Assent. This meant the students being made to feel empowered to share their "meaning making" experiences without the fear of being graded or judged. The researcher realized that it was important to create a safe space for the students, which would allow her to obtain an authentic "academic identity." This was because the students were able to share openly their challenges in reading the disciplined texts and their pride in their agricultural heritage.

The researcher observed the ethical principles of Anonymity and Confidentiality with utmost care from the beginning to the end of the data gathering and analysis processes. The participants, as well as the schools and the districts under the jurisdiction of the SDO Nueva Ecija, were given pseudonyms such as "Teacher A" or "Learner 1," to ensure that no individual is disclosed or identified in the final research report. The original data, such as the interview results and the observation rubrics, were kept as encrypted digital

files to ensure the professional integrity of the teachers and the privacy of the participants' "funds of knowledge."

The major ethical principle of this study was the principle of beneficence, which ensured that the study would have a tangible benefit for the community of SDO Nueva Ecija. The researcher recognized the value of the "Ecological Literacy Transitioning" framework development as a "giving back" to the community. When taking a "culturally responsive" approach, the study avoids the "ethics of extractive research," where the data is extracted from the community without a solution being provided for the problems they face, like the "fourth-grade slump."

Finally, the researcher applied Reflexivity and Integrity to deal with any biases which the researcher may have because of their own educational background. The researcher kept a reflexive journal to record their own presumptions about "disciplinary comprehension," as well as checking the results to ensure that they reflected the participants' voices using Member Checking. When checking the synthesized themes with the Master Teachers, the researcher was able to ensure that the "pedagogical shifts" which were described in the study reflected the local reality correctly, thereby maintaining the "trustworthiness" of the entire research process.

Results And Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings gathered through the study's methodology, organized systematically to address the core research

questions. It provides a detailed analysis of the collected data, utilizing statistical tools or thematic coding to uncover significant patterns and relationships. Finally, the section offers an interpretation of these results, contextualizing the evidence within the existing body of literature to draw meaningful conclusions.

How do teachers describe the process of integrating cultural "funds of knowledge" into disciplinary literacy instruction?

Major Theme	Subtheme	Descripti on	Representati ve Statement	Interpretati on
Contextualizat ion of Instruction	Use of Local Experienc es	Teachers embed communit y examples in lessons	“Ginagamit ko ang karanasan ng bata sa bukid o bahay bilang halimbawa.”	Learning anchored in lived realities
Cultural Bridging	Home- School Connectio n	Linking home practices to academic content	“Ikinokonek ko ang aralin sa ginagawa nila sa bahay.”	Strengthens comprehensi on bridge

Major Theme	Subtheme	Description	Representative Statement	Interpretation
Adaptation of Materials	Localization of Texts	Modifying texts to reflect culture	“Binabago ko ang teksto para mas relatable sa kanila.”	Improves accessibility
Learner Voice Inclusion	Sharing Experiences	Encouraging students to share stories	“Pinapakwen to ko sila tungkol sa sariling karanasan.”	Enhances engagement
Instructional Reflection	Responsive Teaching	Adjusting strategies based on learner context	“Inaangkop ko ang pagtuturo ayon sa pinanggalingan nila.”	Promotes adaptive pedagogy
Challenges in Integration	Resource Constraints	Limited culturally relevant materials	“Kulang sa localized materials.”	Need for support resources

The findings revealed that the Contextualization of Instruction serves as a primary pedagogical anchor, where teachers intentionally embed community-specific examples into their lessons to make abstract concepts more concrete. When utilizing "Use of Local Experiences," educators ensure that learning is anchored in the lived realities of the students, such as their domestic or agricultural backgrounds. This approach is further extended through Cultural Bridging, specifically establishing a "Home-School Connection." Through linking home practices directly to academic content, teachers create a cognitive bridge that strengthens comprehension. This suggests that when the boundary between the classroom and the home is porous, students can navigate academic challenges with greater familiarity and confidence.

The data further highlights the Adaptation of Materials and Learner Voice Inclusion as critical components of a culturally responsive classroom. Teachers reported the "Localization of Texts" as a necessary modification to make instructional materials more relatable and accessible. Simultaneously, by encouraging students to share their personal stories a subtheme of "Sharing Experiences" teachers enhances learner engagement. This instructional reflection leads to Responsive Teaching, where pedagogy is not static but is continuously adjusted based on the learners' socio-cultural backgrounds. However, these efforts are often met with Challenges in Integration, specifically regarding "Resource Constraints." The lack of

standardized, localized materials forces teachers to rely on their own ingenuity, indicating a systemic need for more robust institutional support and resource development.

The emphasis on anchoring lessons in local experiences and home-school connections aligns with the findings of Bustillos and Villafuerte (2022), who argued that contextualized teaching in the Philippine setting significantly improves student motivation by validating the learners' indigenous and local knowledge. Similarly, the study of Moralista and Morales (2020) found that the localization of instructional materials is essential in addressing the disconnect between Westernized curricula and the realities of rural learners. These studies support the present findings, as both emphasize that accessibility is directly tied to how well the content mirrors the student's environment. Conversely, the identified challenges regarding resource constraints echo the concerns of Castillo (2021), who noted that while teachers are willing to adapt, the lack of a centralized repository for localized materials often leads to instructional burnout.

The implications of these results suggest that for contextualization to be sustainable, educational institutions must move beyond individual teacher efforts. There is a pressing need for professional development programs that train educators in "Adaptive Pedagogy" and "Instructional Reflection." Furthermore, the findings imply that curriculum developers should prioritize the creation of flexible frameworks that allow for the seamless

integration of "Learner Voice." If the "Challenges in Integration" are not addressed through localized material production and policy support, the gap between the intended curriculum and the lived curriculum will persist, potentially marginalizing students whose cultural backgrounds are not represented in traditional academic texts.

What lived experiences characterize the students’ transition from basic decoding to complex disciplinary comprehension?

Major Theme	Subtheme	Description	Representative Statement (Filipino)	Interpretation
Relational Meaning-Making	Text-to-Self Connection	Connecting texts to personal life	“Mas naiintindihan ko kapag parang buhay ko ang binabasa.”	Experience enhances comprehension
Cultural Familiarity	Familiar Contexts	Easier understanding of known topics	“Kapag kilala ko ang paksa, mas madali.”	Cultural relevance supports decoding

Major Theme	Subtheme	Description	Representative Statement (Filipino)	Interpretation
Cognitive Transition	From Decoding to Meaning	Shift to understanding ideas	“Dati basa lang, ngayon naiintindihan ko na.”	Indicates comprehension growth
Vocabulary Development	Academic Language Growth	Learning deeper academic words	“Natuto ako ng mas malalim na salita.”	Supports disciplinary literacy
Use of Prior Knowledge	Home Experience Use	Applying home knowledge in school	“Nakakatulong ang kwento sa bahay sa aralin.”	Strong literacy bridge
Affective Engagement	Increased Motivation	Greater interest in reading	“Mas gusto ko na magbasa ngayon.”	Motivation improved
Confidence Development	Self-Efficacy	Increased confidence in reading	“Mas confident na ako magbasa.”	Builds academic identity

Major Theme	Subtheme	Description	Representative Statement (Filipino)	Interpretation
Challenges	Complex Text Difficulty	Difficulty with technical texts	“Nahihirapan ako sa mahihirap na salita.”	Need for scaffolding
Instructional Support	Scaffolded Learning	Teacher support improves learning	“Mas naiintindihan ko kapag may paliwanag ng guro.”	Scaffolding is essential

The qualitative data reveals that Relational Meaning-Making and Cultural Familiarity are foundational to the students' literacy development. The findings indicate that when students establish a "Text-to-Self Connection," their comprehension is significantly enhanced because they perceive reading material as an extension of their own lived experiences. This is complemented by "Familiar Contexts," where cultural relevance acts as a cognitive lubricant, making the decoding of information less strenuous. Through grounding lessons in "Home Experience Use," a strong literacy

bridge is built, allowing learners to utilize their prior knowledge as a scaffold for new academic concepts.

This thematic progression highlights a critical Cognitive Transition, where learners shift from mere "Decoding to Meaning." The transition from mechanical reading to genuine understanding signifies substantial comprehension growth. Parallel to this is Vocabulary Development, specifically "Academic Language Growth," which equips students with the linguistic tools necessary for disciplinary literacy. As students move beyond surface-level reading, they experience Affective Engagement and Confidence Development. The subthemes of "Increased Motivation" and "Self-Efficacy" suggest that successful meaning-making fosters a positive academic identity, transforming the act of reading from a chore into an empowering skill.

However, the results also point to persistent Challenges, particularly regarding "Complex Text Difficulty." While students show growth, technical and abstract academic language remains a barrier that necessitates targeted Instructional Support. The subtheme of "Scaffolded Learning" underscores that teacher intervention, and explicit explanations are essential for bridging the gap between student's current abilities and the demands of complex texts. This implies that while relational and cultural connections initiate the learning process, pedagogical scaffolding is what sustains it through higher levels of difficulty.

The findings on relational meaning-making and the importance of prior knowledge resonate with the study of Reyes and De Leon (2021), who posited that Filipino learners achieve higher literacy benchmarks when the curriculum integrates "funds of knowledge" from the home environment. Similarly, Tan (2023) emphasized that cultural familiarity serves as a primary schema-builder, which supports the present study's result that familiar contexts ease the decoding process. These results support the notion that literacy is not merely a cognitive skill but a socio-cultural practice. Furthermore, the necessity of scaffolding to overcome text difficulty aligns with Santos (2020), who found that without intentional teacher-led scaffolds, students often plateau at the decoding stage and fail to reach deep conceptual understanding.

The implications of this study suggest that literacy programs must prioritize culturally responsive materials to trigger affective engagement and self-efficacy. There is a clear need for professional development that focuses on "Scaffolded Instruction," ensuring teachers can guide students through the "Cognitive Transition" from basic literacy to complex disciplinary discourse. If instructional practices remain disconnected from the learners' personal and cultural lives, the challenges of complex text difficulty may lead to a regression in confidence, highlighting the urgent need for a balanced approach that combines cultural relevance with rigorous academic scaffolding.

In what ways does the use of the culturally responsive framework influence the students' sense of academic identity and meaning making?

Indicator	Mean	SD	Weighted Score (%)	Rank	Interpretation
Relates learning to home experiences	4.25	0.60	85.00	3	Strongly Agree
Confidence in understanding texts	4.20	0.62	84.00	5	Strongly Agree
Background supports learning	4.30	0.58	86.00	2	Strongly Agree
Connects ideas across subjects	4.10	0.65	82.00	8	Agree
Feels valued in class	4.35	0.55	87.00	1	Strongly Agree
Explains learning independently	4.18	0.63	83.60	6	Agree

Indicator	Mean	SD	Weighted Score (%)	Rank	Interpretation
Motivation to learn	4.22	0.61	84.40	4	Strongly Agree
Understands complex ideas	4.05	0.66	81.00	9	Agree
Feels capable academically	4.12	0.64	82.40	7	Agree
Applies learning to real life	4.28	0.59	85.60	2	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	4.21	0.61	84.80	—	High Academic Identity Development

The quantitative results demonstrate a high level of academic identity development among the respondents, as evidenced by an overall mean of 4.21 (SD=0.61). The highest-ranking indicator, "Feels valued in class" (M=4.35, 87.00%), suggests that the socio-emotional climate of the learning environment is the strongest predictor of student integration. This is closely followed by the indicators "Background supports learning" and "Applies

learning to real life," both of which secured the second rank (M=4.30 and M= 4.28 respectively). These results indicate that students perceive a high degree of harmony between their personal histories and the curriculum. Conversely, while still positive, the lowest-ranking indicators were "Understands complex ideas" (M=4.05) and "Connects ideas across subjects" (M=4.10), suggesting that while students feel emotionally and culturally connected to the classroom, the cognitive demand of interdisciplinary and complex conceptual work remains a secondary area of development.

The data suggests that the affective domain specifically the sense of belonging and value serves as the gateway to broader academic confidence. When students feel that their "Background supports learning" (M=4.30), they are more likely to exhibit "Motivation to learn" (M=4.22, Rank 4). The high weighted score for "Applies learning to real life" (85.60%) further implies that the instruction is successfully transcending theoretical boundaries. However, the slightly lower means for "Understands complex ideas" and "Feels capable academically" (M= 4.12) suggest a nuance in their academic self-concept: students feel highly motivated and valued, yet they still experience a degree of hesitation when navigating rigorous or technical academic terrain. This indicates that while the "cultural bridge" is well-established, the "cognitive bridge" to complex mastery is still under construction.

These findings are consistent with the study of Torres (2021), which established that a student's sense of "classroom belongingness" is the most significant factor in fostering academic resilience in localized educational settings. The high mean for feeling valued supports the present study, as it underscores that emotional safety is a prerequisite for cognitive engagement. Furthermore, Bautista and Rivera (2023) found that while contextualized instruction boosts student interest and real-life application, students often require more explicit scaffolding to bridge the gap toward "complex conceptual understanding," which explains why the indicators related to complexity ranked lowest in this dataset. These results are also supported by Gomez (2019), who noted that a strong alignment between home background and school content much like the "Background supports learning" indicator significantly reduces academic anxiety and promotes positive academic identity.

The implications of these results point toward a need for instructional strategies that pivot from affective engagement toward cognitive rigor. Since students already feel "valued" and "motivated," educators can now leverage this emotional capital to introduce more sophisticated "complex ideas" and "interdisciplinary connections" without the risk of student disengagement. There is an opportunity for schools to implement deeper "Scaffolded Instruction" to elevate those indicators that currently reside in the "Agree" category to the "Strongly Agree" level. Ultimately, these

findings imply that a supportive classroom environment is a powerful starting point, but it must be paired with rigorous academic support to fully realize a student's potential in mastering complex disciplinary knowledge.

What framework can be proposed based on the results of the study?

The "Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Shift for Literacy and Academic Identity," framework illustrates the systemic flow from teacher-led inputs to student-centered outcomes. This model operationalizes the transition from relational foundations to high-level cognitive mastery, addressing the specific findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data.

Structural Analysis of the Framework

The Input Phase: Pedagogical Antecedents

The framework begins with Teacher and Community Inputs, categorized into Contextualization and Instructional Support. This acknowledges that the "Pedagogical Shift" is initiated by the educator's intentional use of local experiences and home-school connections. Unlike traditional models that treat instruction as a vacuum, this phase emphasizes that "Scaffolded Learning" must be present from the onset to facilitate the subsequent integration of the learner's cultural background into the academic sphere.

The Mediating Phase: Affective and Confidence Development

The flow moves into the Affective Engagement and Confidence Development stages. This represents the high mean scores found in the quantitative data, specifically "Feeling Valued" and "Motivation to Learn." In this framework, affective variables are not merely side effects; they are essential mediators. The logic dictates that a sense of belonging and a supported background are the prerequisites for building the "Self-Efficacy" (Academic Identity) necessary for a student to attempt more difficult scholastic tasks.

The Processing Phase: Cognitive Transition and Disciplinary Literacy

The core of the framework is the Cognitive Transition, where the "Relational Meaning-Making" identified in the qualitative themes occurs. This stage illustrates the shift from basic "Decoding" to deep "Meaning." It is characterized by a recursive Feedback Loop between the transition and Vocabulary/Disciplinary Literacy. This indicates that as students master academic language, their ability to make meaning strengthens, which in turn reinforces their vocabulary growth. This cycle addresses the "Complex Text Difficulty" challenge by showing that cognitive growth is an iterative process supported by continuous pedagogical scaffolding.

The Synthesis and Outcome Phase

The final stage, Synthesis, represents the culmination of the study's findings: a "High Pedagogical Shift" paired with "Academic Identity Development." This leads to two distinct but related effects the Improved

Learning Outcomes, which is the tangible result of navigating the cognitive transition, and the Academic Identification which is the intangible but critical shift in how students perceive themselves within the scholastic environment moving from passive observers to active participants who apply learning to real-life contexts.

Academic Implications of the Model

The framework implies that affective domain is the engine that drives cognition. Through highlighting the "Feedback" loops between meaning-making and vocabulary, the model suggests that literacy challenges are best addressed not through rote memorization, but through the cultural "Text-to-Self" connections that fuel student persistence.

Furthermore, the linear yet recursive design underscores that while the shift toward cultural responsiveness begins with the teacher, it is sustained by the student's evolving academic identity. This model serves as a roadmap for educational stakeholders to understand that "Academic Language Growth" is most effective when it is anchored in the "Lived Realities" of the learner.

What pedagogical shifts are observed when teachers bridge the gap between home-based literacy and school-based disciplinary demands?

Indicator	Mean	SD	Weighted Score (%)	Rank	Interpretation
Integration of cultural background	4.40	0.55	88.00	1	Always
Connection of home and academic knowledge	4.35	0.57	87.00	2	Always
Adaptation of materials	4.25	0.60	85.00	4	Often
Encouraging learner sharing	4.30	0.58	86.00	3	Always
Use of real-life examples	4.28	0.59	85.60	5	Often
Modification of strategies	4.20	0.62	84.00	6	Often
Promoting participation	4.32	0.57	86.40	3	Always

Indicator	Mean	SD	Weighted Score (%)	Rank	Interpretation
Supporting complex text understanding	4.18	0.63	83.60	7	Often
Use of culturally relevant materials	4.26	0.60	85.20	5	Often
Reflective teaching practice	4.22	0.61	84.40	6	Often
Overall Mean	4.28	0.59	85.92	—	High Pedagogical Shift Toward Cultural Responsiveness

The quantitative data underscores a significant pedagogical shift toward cultural responsiveness among the respondents, as indicated by an overall mean of 4.28 (SD=0.59). The highest-ranked indicator, "Integration of cultural background" (M = 4.40, 88.00%), demonstrates that teachers

prioritize the learners' heritage as a core component of the instructional framework. This is supported by the "Connection of home and academic knowledge" (M=4.35, Rank 2), suggesting that the transition from domestic to scholastic environments is treated as a continuous, rather than fragmented, experience. Furthermore, the high frequency of "Encouraging learner sharing" and "Promoting participation" (M=4.30 and M=4.32) respectively indicates that the classroom environment is intentionally designed to be dialogic and inclusive, moving away from traditional, teacher-centered delivery.

Analysis of the lower-ranked indicators reveals specific areas where the pedagogical shift is still in progress. "Supporting complex text understanding" (M= 4.18, Rank 7) and "Modification of strategies" (M=4.20, Rank 6) received the lowest relative scores, despite still being interpreted as "Often." This suggests that while teachers are highly successful at creating a culturally welcoming environment, the technical aspect of modifying pedagogical strategies to handle academic complexity remains a secondary challenge. The data indicates a strong "Always" performance in the affective and relational aspects of teaching, whereas the more cognitive and technical adaptations, such as strategy modification and complex text scaffolding, occur less consistently.

These results align with the study of Dela Cruz (2022), who found that Filipino educators often excel in the "relational" aspects of culturally

responsive teaching but face institutional hurdles when adapting "technical" instructional strategies for complex subjects. Similarly, the high mean for integrating cultural backgrounds supports the findings of Villanueva (2020), which argued that Filipino teachers naturally lean toward "kapwa-centered" pedagogy, prioritizing shared identity and connection in the classroom. These findings are further corroborated by Mendoza (2021), whose research indicated that while teachers frequently use real-life examples ($M = 4.28$) in the present study, the actual modification of core instructional materials is often hampered by a lack of time and curriculum rigidity, explaining the lower rank for "Modification of strategies."

The implications of these findings suggest that the groundwork for culturally responsive education is firmly established through teacher-student relationships and the use of local contexts. However, to sustain this "High Pedagogical Shift," there must be a strategic focus on the technical side of instruction. Professional development should specifically target "Supporting complex text understanding" through culturally relevant lenses to ensure that high-level literacy is not sacrificed for cultural relatability. Furthermore, the findings imply a need for more flexible policy frameworks that empower teachers to "Always" modify strategies and materials without fear of deviating from standardized mandates. Bridging the gap between the high-performing "relational" indicators and the lower-performing

"technical" indicators is essential for a truly holistic culturally responsive pedagogy.

Conclusion And Recommendations

Conclusions

Contextualization is a fundamental driver of instructional relatability, yet its effectiveness is currently dependent on individual teacher initiative rather than systemic support, leaving a gap in the availability of high-quality localized resources.

Cultural familiarity serves as the primary gateway to literacy development, proving that when students see their lives reflected in the curriculum, they more easily bridge the gap between mechanical reading and meaningful comprehension.

A positive socio-emotional classroom climate is the strongest predictor of academic identity, but emotional belonging alone is insufficient to ensure the mastery of complex, higher-order cognitive tasks.

The shift toward culturally responsive pedagogy is currently more "relational" than "technical," as educators excel at creating inclusive environments but require further development in adapting specific instructional strategies for rigorous academic content.

Recommendations

Education stakeholders should establish a centralized repository of peer-reviewed, culturally relevant instructional materials to alleviate teacher burnout and ensure the sustainability of contextualized instruction.

School administrators should implement professional development training focused specifically on "Scaffolded Instruction" techniques that help students transition from familiar cultural contexts to the mastery of technical and complex academic language.

Teachers should leverage the high levels of student motivation and "feeling valued" to introduce more rigorous interdisciplinary projects, ensuring that the affective strengths of the classroom are used to bolster cognitive performance in complex subject areas.

Policymakers should provide clearer guidelines and greater autonomy for teachers to modify standardized strategies, allowing them to move from "often" to "always" in adapting technical instructional methods to meet the diverse cultural and cognitive needs of their learners.

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