

Roots of Literacy: A Phenomenological Study of Matigsalug Parents in Shaping their Childrens' Early Reading

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Abstract

The Matigsalug, an indigenous community primarily residing in the uphill regions of Davao, Mindanao, face distinct socio-economic realities and cultural dynamics that profoundly influence their children's early reading development. This study employed qualitative method especially phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Matigsalug parents in fostering their children's early reading. The participants included six parents of children enrolled in early childhood education. In-depth interviews revealed that direct literacy instruction, such as basic reading and writing activities, was generally less common in the early years of children's education within the Matigsalug community. Furthermore, cultural storytelling and the teaching of Matigsalug words, which are cornerstone to their cultural identity, were not widely practiced. Despite this, parents expressed a strong desire for their children's academic success, a goal often driven by their own unfulfilled educational aspirations. This situation is largely attributable to socio-economic limitations, lower parental educational backgrounds, and scarcity of educational resources. These findings underscore the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and logistical factors in fostering parental involvement in indigenous contexts, emphasizing the need for culturally relevant and community-led solutions to enhance early literacy.

Keywords: Matigsalug; parental involvement; early reading and literacy

1. Introduction

Parents' home reading practices impact their children's early reading skills (Wu & Hindman, 2024). However, in the IP community I observed that parents faced challenges in assisting their young children with basic reading. Socioeconomic status, particularly lower parental education and financial hardship, significantly hinders parental involvement in education. This is often due to parents' own literacy challenges and cultural priorities in low-income communities that favor economic survival over educational engagement to their children (Masudi & Silaji, 2024; Halis et al., 2024).

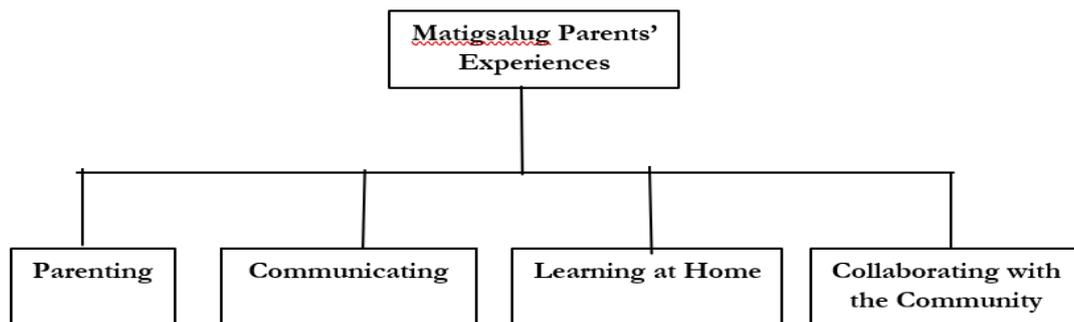
In my country, the Philippines, parental involvement also plays a crucial role in how well young children develop their early reading skills (Chavez et. al, 2023). But, challenges such as parents having low levels of education and limited access to learning materials frequently impede their capacity to support their children, especially in underserved communities (Murro, et. al, 2023).

The absence of parental engagement to their children can inhibit academic, emotional, and social growth (Masudi & Silaji, 2024). Low parental educational attainment often associated with low socioeconomic status is predictive of a child's dropout (Enanoza, 2023). And, dropout rates is one of the problems that can turn to a considerable number of illiterate Filipinos and out of school youths who are not ready for work (Cuesta, 2020). In the context of the Matigsalug people, if parents are not actively engaged in reading or storytelling in their mother tongue, it could contribute to language shift and the erosion of their cultural identity (Kaunda, 2025). It is in this understanding of the profound impact of parental involvement that compels me to explore the nuanced ways in which parents among Matigsalug tribe shape their children's early reading journeys.

This research holds substantial significance for stakeholders in educational institutions because the findings can serve as a valuable model for educators supporting early literacy in other indigenous communities with unique cultural contexts. Moreover, this study contributes to the wider academic community by expanding knowledge on literacy development within under-researched populations. As a result, the study promises to support the development of more effective educational policies and practices, ultimately enriching the field of education.

In this study, several key assumptions underpin the research approach. Firstly, the lived experiences of Matigsalug parents are considered central, holding rich and valuable insights into the nuances of their children's early reading development within their specific cultural context. Secondly, the phenomenological approach is deemed appropriate for uncovering the essence of these parental experiences by focusing on their perceptions and interpretations to gain a deeper understanding. Finally, the Matigsalug culture is assumed to significantly shape parenting practices and the fostering of early literacy, with these cultural factors being actively intertwined with the development of reading skills.

This study used the Epstein framework of parental involvement, a widely recognized model that outlines six key types of parental engagement: *parenting*, *communicating*, *volunteering*, *learning at home*, *decision-making*, and *collaborating with the community*. Under this framework, parental involvement includes a wide range of activities: those undertaken at home, those at school, and interactions with teachers and the wider community (Epstein, 2018). However, this study focuses on specific types of parental involvement, intentionally excluding *volunteering* and *decision-making*.



2. Method

This study utilized a qualitative design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of Matigsalug parents as they influence their children's early reading development. Data were collected using an interview guide.

This research was conducted in Sitio Kapatagan, Barangay Gumitan, Marilog District, Davao City. This site was selected due to its significant population of Matigsalug families and the notable enrollment of children from the Matigsalug tribe in the local school.

Individual and group interviews were conducted to six parents. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to participants ensuring that the insights gathered were relevant to the study's objectives. The selection criteria was identified Matigsalug parents of children within the early reading developmental stage at Datu Timawa Elementary School particularly from Kinder to Grade 3. On the other hand, parents who were not from the Matigsalug tribe were excluded, as the study aimed to understand the specific experiences within this cultural group.

The researcher followed some generally accepted ethical practices in conducting this study in the IP community. Therefore, the researcher sent letters as an entry protocol, asking permissions from the school head, community leader, and tribal chieftain of the Matigsalug community. After the request was approved, data was gathered by meeting the participants who were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and benefits. It is also explained that participation was entirely voluntary, participants had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and their identities were protected. The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity and respect for the traditions, beliefs, and values of the Matigsalug tribe. Then, they were asked to sign an agreement to participate in this study. The researcher conducted the study after the respondents signed the form and agreed to participate.

The data analysis began with a repeated reading of each interview transcript to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the parents' narratives. Complementing this, the audio recordings were carefully listened to, allowing for the capture of crucial contextual cues such as tone and emphasis, thereby enriching the insights gleaned from the written transcripts. Throughout this immersive process, notes were generated, identifying recurring thematic elements, documenting personal reflections and insights, and noting connections both within and across individual interviews. The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the major themes, subthemes, and emergent themes wherein the socio-cultural context of the Matigsalug community were continuously considered to understand its influence on early literacy practices, taking into account oral traditions, resource access, and community values.

3. Result and Discussion



Result

| Themes | Subthemes | Emergent Themes |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Nurturing a Foundation for Learning | -Meeting Basic Needs - Language-rich Interactions -Designating Space | -No Cultural Oral Storytelling - Aspirations for a Brighter Future through Literacy |
| 2. Bridging Worlds | - Communication among Parents | -Lack of Verbal Inquiries to Teachers |
| 3. Limited Literacy at Home | -Teaching their Children with Early Writing and Reading - Educational Videos in Mobile Phone - Follow-up after School - Literacy Role Models - Exposure to Environmental Print | -Scarcity of Learning Resources - Resourcefulness in the Face of Constraints - Work and Parenting Split Teaching Time -No Explicit Teaching of <u>Matigsalug Text</u> |
| 4.Synergistic Partnership | -Mutual Support in Times of Need -Community Event -External Support and Advocacy | |

This chapter presents the major themes describing the lived experiences of Matigsalug parents in shaping their children's early reading: Nurturing a Foundation for Learning (*Parenting*), Bridging Worlds (*Communicating*), Limited Literacy at Home (*Learning at Home*), and Synergistic Partnership (*Collaborating with the Community*).

Theme 1: Nurturing a Foundation for Learning (*Parenting*)

All parents, despite facing socio-economic constraints, still ensured their children's basic needs were met, recognizing these as fundamental for learning readiness. This included providing food security, adequate rest, and a safe home environment. Furthermore, all interviewed parents engaged in language-rich interactions with their children, actively valuing and practicing their mother tongue at home. Oral activities were rich at home such as conversations, singing, and listening to Matigsalug and Bisaya Christian songs. And, even with limited living space, some parents made a conscious effort to create or plan a designated area, however small, for their children's literacy activities.

"Ganahan mi dinhi sa balay sir magkanta-kanta labi na pang-Kristubanon sama sa kanta nga "Sa Matag Adlaw". (P2)
"We love singing songs here in the house sir especially Christian songs like "Sa Matag Adlaw". (P2)

"Diria mi sila sa sala sir. Mangyaka rami samtang gabuhat sa mga activities" (P1)
"We do the activities here in the sala with the children." (P1)

"Nag-plano ko sir nga magpa-himo ug gamayng kwartu diri nga side kung asa dadtu sila mag-study nga walay samuk." (P6)
"I plan sir to construct a small space wherein there they can study there quietly " (P6)

Even though traditional cultural storytelling wasn't a common practice, Matigsalug families placed a high value on literacy. This was largely fueled by their aspirations for their children to achieve educational and economic success, especially since many parents themselves had limited formal education. Despite their own educational backgrounds, these parents consistently expressed a strong belief in the power of reading and literacy to transform their children's future.

"Wala ko ga-share ug ing-ana sir" (P1)
"I don't share him like that (spoken stories in the Matigsalug Tribe) sir" (P1)

“Wala ko kasulay ug share sir sa iya ug stories sa Matigsalug” (P2)
“I haven’t tried sharing to him sir Matigsalug folklores” (P2)

“Ginatudloan naku sila diri sir sa balay arun pag naa sila sa eskwelahan dili sila maglisd. Mao ni akung pamaagi sa pagsuporta sa ila. Akung tinguba sa ila nga makapadayun sila ug eskwela arun pag-abot sa panabon makab-ot ilang pangandoy. Wala silay laing ginaingon duba kundi mahimong titser. Akung kinamagulangan muingon nga gusto gyud siya mahimong titser, pareho pud sa akung kamanghuran.” (P1)
“I teach them here sir at home so that when they go to school they will not have hard time there. This is my way of supporting them. My desire for them is that they can continue schooling and one day reach their dreams. The two of them don’t have any dream but to become a teacher. My eldest always tell me she wants to be a teacher and same also with the youngest.” (P1)

“Gina-encourage ko ra mana siya sir nga mi-eskwela arun dili siya mapareho sa amo nga wala kabuman. Grade 7 raku kutob sir ug mi-undang na tungod sa kawad-un ug problem pud sa pamilya. Mao nang gina-focus naku sa iya tanan. Mi-undang ko sauna ug karun siya ang mupadayon.” (P2)
“I encourage my son sir to continue schooling so that he will not be like us who are not able to finish. Me I just finish Grade 7 and then stop due to financial hardship and parental concern. That is why I focus everything to him. I stopped before and now he will be the one to continue.” (P2)

“Pangandoy naku sa ila nga makabalu sila mubasa ug mulampos arun dili sila maparebas sa amu. Grade 2 ra aku nabuman sir.” (P4)
“I really dream for them that they will know how to read and finish school so that they will not be like us. I just finish Grade 2 sir.” (P4)

Theme 2: Bridging Worlds (*Communicating*)

Matigsalug parents often communicate informally within their community about school programs like reading readiness. However, parents typically don't approach teachers at school to ask about their children's progress, especially with reading. This is often due to dependence completely on teachers for all matters related to their children's education.

Theme 3: Limited Literacy at Home (*Learning at Home*)

Even without formal teaching of Matigsalug words, most parents though minimal teaching still helped their children with early reading and writing attempts, especially with writing their names. Some parents even downloaded educational videos on their phones for their children to watch, which help them learned about letters, sounds, and how reading and writing work. While only a few parents consistently follow up at home by going over activity worksheets or spending extra time learning, literate family members play a big role. Older siblings or other relatives who can read often act as role models and provide support. Additionally, some homes have print materials visible, like educational charts, handwritten religious texts, or school worksheets pinned to the walls. Children naturally notice and interact with these materials, even without direct instruction.

“Sa na pa siya mag-kinder sir akung una gitudlo sa iya kay ang iyang ngaran. Gusto ko ma-memorize niya iyang ngaran. Sa sugod di pa siya kabalo mugunit ug lapis. Gina-gunitan naku iyang kamot samtang gasugod pagsulat” (P1)
“Prior going to kinder sir, first, I teach my son in writing his name. I want him to memorize his name. At first, he does not know how to hold the pencil. I am assisting his hands while writing.” (P1)

“Nalipay kaayu ko sir katung time nga kabalu na siya sa mga pipila ka mga letra sa iyang ngaran kay mao gyud na akung gina balik-balik sa iya, iyang ngaran” (P3)
“I was particularly very happy sir when the time he knew how to write some of the letters of his name because that was the first

repeated writing attempts I teach him, his name.” (P3)

“Pag mag-tudlo ko sa iya ug basa sir akung tagsa-tagsabun.” (P4) (P5)
“When I teach him reading, I do it by syllables.” (P4) (P5)

“Pag-uli niya gikan eskuelahan sir, abrihan naku iyang bag, pangitaon ilang activity. Pangutan-on naku siya asa siya naglisud.” (P1)
“When he arrives from school sir, I will open his bag, and look for the worksheets. I will then ask him where he has hard time” (P1)

“Siya sir interesado gyud na siya sa pagbasa. Kasagaran sa iyaha na siyang iyaan magpatudlo nga high-school student.” (P2)
“My son sir is really interested in reading. Most of the time the one who teaches him is my husbands’ sister who is a high school student” (P2)

The number of reading and writing materials available in Matigsalug homes varied greatly, often reflected financial challenges. However, some parents were very resourceful, making the most of the few books, writing supplies, and downloaded learning videos they had. In the geographically isolated uplands of Marilog District, where Matigsalug families mainly live on their ancestral lands, where fathers are not only the farmers but also the mothers, and mainly farming is their source of living. Moreover, they are also busy with house chores, caring for animals, raising baby, and running small business. Because of these demands, they can't dedicate much time to their children's education. While the Matigsalug language is richly used and spoken at home, parents don't teach their children to read or write in their mother tongue. All parents reported explicitly teaching in Bisaya, Tagalog, and English instead. This is simply because there are no reading materials or books available in the Matigsalug language.

“Ga-handum ko ug daghan pa untang libro diri sa balay para dili lang pud sa cellphone pirminti.”
“I wish to have more children books here at home so that I will not only depend on using cellphones in teaching them”. (P1)

“Ang akung pamaagi sir sa akung anak kay isulat naku sa notebook, ipakita dayun sa iya, ug itudlo ang A,B, C, D. Wala koy charts diri kay walay space kay gamay ra among balay.”
“My way of teaching sir to my child is that I write it in the notebook, show it to him, and teach A, B, C, D. I don't have charts here because our house is small and there is no space.” (P2)

“Gasulat ug gatudlo ko sa ila, kung unsa rapud ang naa sa among balay sir.” (P4) (P5)
“Out of what we have in the house like paper or notebook, I write and teach it to them sir.” (P4) (P5)

Theme 4: Synergistic Partnership (Collaborating with the Community)

The subthemes highlighted a strong system of mutual support among parents, the school, and the community when facing educational challenges, especially a lack of resources. This demonstrated a reciprocal relationship focused on the children's education. Parents actively encouraged their children to participate in community events. These events exposed children to a rich array of language, symbols, and narratives, which in turn fostered their understanding of their own culture—a crucial foundation for reading comprehension. Furthermore, parents recognized the vital role of NGOs and other external organizations in providing resources and advocating for educational access in their remote areas, underscoring a broader collaborative network that helps their children learn.

“Nalipay mi nga miabot ug sa gi-panghatag sa mga taga-Ateneo ug 911 nga mga gamit sa mga bata. Daku ug tabang sa ilang pag-eskwela labi na nga wala kaayu mi ikapalit” (P4)
“We are happy they arrive and to what Ateneo and 911 gave to the children. The learning materials greatly help in their schooling especially also that we don't have money to buy.” (P4)

Discussion

For Matigsalug parents, the first theme showed that while their homes might not be "literacy-rich environments" in the traditional sense, they foster their children's development through language-rich interactions, providing for their basic well-being, and inspiring them to pursue academic success. This inspiration often stems from the parents' own unfulfilled educational journeys. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs physiological needs (food, water, shelter, sleep) and safety needs must be met before individuals can pursue higher-level needs, such as cognitive needs like understanding and learning (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Meanwhile, a common challenge from parents revealed in the study that they do not know and are not sharing cultural storytelling to their children as an indigenous practice. If language isn't being actively used and transmitted by parents at home, especially through activities like storytelling, the language is highly vulnerable to shift and eventual loss (Fishman, 1991). Storytelling and narrative play a significant role in shaping cultural identity and understanding the world around us (Ladzekpo et. al, 2024).

For the second theme it was observed that parents frequently discuss school programs like reading readiness informally among themselves. However, they generally don't initiate conversations with teachers about their children's academic progress, particularly in reading. This seems to stem from a belief that teachers are solely responsible for all aspects of their children's education. When parents are involved in teacher-related support and attend school activities, children's motivation, attendance, and performance improve over time. (Yaqoob et. al, 2025). In some communities, people often view schools as solely responsible for education, rather than recognizing it as a shared effort between parents and teachers. This perspective can limit parents' active involvement in their children's learning (Shukia & Marobo, 2023).

For the third theme, the findings showed that literacy, such as simple reading and writing activities, was mostly less prevalent in the early years within the home due to socio-economic factors, lower parental attainment, and scarcity of educational resources. A study in Tanzania revealed that socioeconomic factors and low parental education levels significantly impact parents' involvement in their children's pre-primary education (Shukia & Marobo, 2023). Conversely, parents with higher levels of education often play a more proactive role in ensuring their children's school attendance and involvement in learning (Moshoeshoe, 2020). Active parental involvement correlates with better academic performance; children tend to achieve better results due to increased motivation and support at home (Ilie et al., 2021). However, many parents are unable to get meaningfully involved in education because of limited resources and lack of support structures (Smith, 2023).

For the fourth theme, Matigsalug parents, the school, and the community collaboratively support children's education. Parents encourage their children to participate in community events, believing this exposure to local language, symbols, and narratives strengthens cultural understanding crucial for reading comprehension. "Local communities understand that NGOs and other external groups are crucial for providing resources and championing educational access in remote areas. This highlights a wide-ranging, collaborative effort to support their children's education. Stronger ties between schools and NGOs could also boost parental engagement (Yu et al., 2024). Typically, NGOs direct their efforts towards underserved communities, offering educational programs that highlight the significant influence parents have on their children. This could involve organizing workshops that show parents how to support at-home learning or giving them resources to understand the educational system better (4 Types of Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education, 2021).

Based on the findings, several avenues for future research and practical application emerge: Further research could delve into the interplay between the Matigsalug language, Filipino, and English in early literacy development, exploring how parents navigate multilingualism in shaping their children's reading. Finally, replicating this phenomenological approach in other indigenous communities within the Philippines or globally could provide

comparative insights into the commonalities and unique expressions of parental involvement in diverse cultural contexts.

During the course of this study, several challenges became apparent. The remote location of many Matigsalug communities poses significant challenges for consistent distribution of educational resources. Moreover, the daily struggle for subsistence often limits the time and resources parents can dedicate to formal school involvement. Furthermore, the scarcity of age-appropriate reading materials presents a significant hurdle, limiting opportunities for children to engage with print. Finally, some parents, particularly those with limited formal schooling, may perceive their role as primarily providing for basic needs, leaving academic instruction solely to the school. Bridging this perception gap requires reciprocal education efforts from both schools and the community. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions to address the unique situations of families facing such conditions. By fostering positive environments and ensuring adequate facilities, stakeholders can bolster parental involvement and ultimately lead to better educational outcomes for children in underserved communities.

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To God, *who made everything happen; the author of wisdom and knowledge; and the world's greatest teaching agent,*

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Psalms 30:12

"that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever."

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