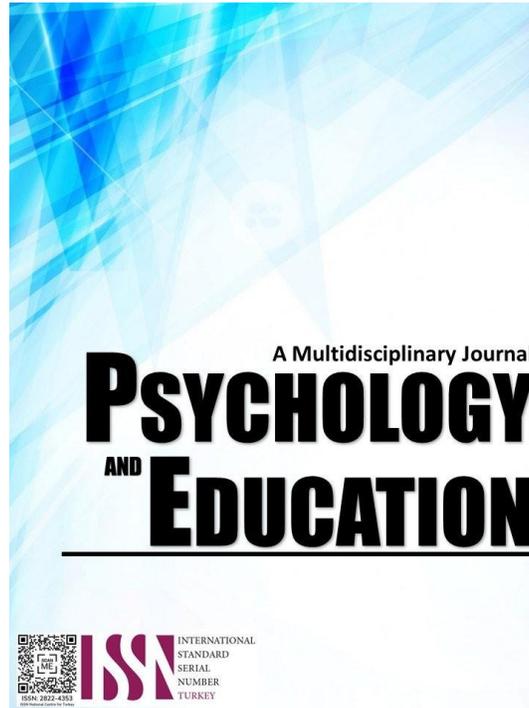


# UNDERSTANDING THE STIGMA OF FRUSTRATED AND NON-READERS AND THE PERCEIVED EFFECTS ON THEIR MOTIVATION



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## Understanding the Stigma of Frustrated and Non-Readers and the Perceived Effects on their Motivation

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### Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the stigma experienced by frustrated and non-reading students in selected public secondary schools and examined its perceived impact on their motivation to read and learn. Grounded in Goffman's Stigma Theory and Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, the study examined how stigma is internalized and its impact on students' academic behavior and engagement. Thirty-six junior high school students identified as frustrated and non-readers through the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) participated in six focus group discussions (FGD 1–FGD 6). Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed seven (7) emergent themes describing how stigma is felt: Emotional Pain Rooted in Public Exposure and Judgment, Oral Reading Anxiety, Home-Based Neglect, Criticism, and Resource Limitation, Instructional Insensitivity, Systemic Labeling, Lack of Self-Esteem and Self-Worth, and Disengagement as a Defense Mechanism. These themes capture the emotional toll of stigma as students experience public embarrassment, ridicule, harsh correction, and social labeling—leading to internalized feelings of fear, shame, and inferiority. In terms of its perceived effects on motivation, two (2) emergent themes were identified: Withdrawal and Detachment as Protective Mechanisms and Desire for Individualized and Compassionate Support. While stigma often leads students to avoid reading tasks, disengage from class, or consider dropping out, many also expressed a strong willingness to improve when supported with patient, empathetic, and stigma-free instruction. The study emphasizes the urgent need for stigma-sensitive teaching approaches, emotionally safe classrooms, and supportive interventions that address both the emotional and academic needs of struggling readers. By creating a learning environment where students feel seen, respected, and supported, schools can help re-engage students who are frustrated or struggling with literacy in their development.

**Keywords:** *stigma, impact, students' motivation, frustrated readers non-readers, academic engagement, stigma-sensitive teaching practices*

### Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in achieving academic success and fostering lifelong learning. Yet, many students continue to face significant challenges in developing reading proficiency, even with the presence of various literacy programs. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) introduced tools like the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) to assess students' reading skills and classify them into levels such as independent, instructional, frustrated, or non-reader (DepEd, 2018). Although these assessments are intended to support learners by identifying their needs, they can unintentionally lead to labeling that negatively affects students' motivation and self-image.

Being categorized as a frustrated or non-reader can lead to a deep sense of shame or embarrassment. Stigma, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, refers to a social mark of disgrace tied to a particular trait or condition. Goffman (1963) further described it as an attribute that discredits a person in the eyes of society. Stigma is not simply a personal reaction but a reflection of societal norms that may promote exclusion. For struggling readers, this can manifest as feelings of inadequacy and social withdrawal, discouraging them from engaging in literacy-related tasks. Based on the researcher's experience as a reading coordinator, students labeled as poor readers often avoid class participation and, in some cases, discontinue schooling altogether.

While academic interventions for reading difficulties are widely discussed in existing literature, there remains a lack of focus on the emotional and psychological impact of being labeled as a struggling reader. As Clemente (2022) points out, literacy programs often emphasize skill-building but tend to overlook the impact of stigma on a student's motivation. This study seeks to explore that gap by investigating how frustrated and non-readers experience stigma and how it influences their desire to learn. Ultimately, the goal is to inform the development of more inclusive, emotionally supportive educational strategies that prioritize both learning outcomes and student well-being.

### Research Questions

This research examined the reading stigma felt by frustrated and non-readers by exploring their emotions, experiences, and interactions in school. Thus, this study examined how these students responded to their struggles and whether these reactions influenced their motivation to read and learn. Furthermore, it investigated whether being labeled as a frustrated or non-reader influenced the way others treated them and how they perceived themselves as learners. Generally, this study aimed to explore the nature of this stigma, how it was experienced by frustrated and non-readers, and its perceived effects on their motivation. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What reading stigma are felt by frustrated and non-readers?
2. What are the perceived effects of the reading stigma on their motivation to read and learn?

## Literature Review

### *Reading Proficiency and Reading Levels*

Reading proficiency entails the ability to accurately decode, comprehend, and fluently interpret written texts suitable to one's educational level. This skill comprises several core components, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd, 2018) uses the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) as a tool to evaluate reading proficiency. This assessment classifies students into four levels: Independent, Instructional, Frustrated, and Non-reader.

Independent readers are able to read and comprehend texts without much teacher guidance, while instructional readers may require occasional support but generally keep pace with academic expectations. In contrast, frustrated readers face significant barriers in comprehension despite having some decoding ability. These students often struggle with fluency and fail to grasp the meaning of the texts they read, necessitating close supervision. Non-readers, on the other hand, demonstrate a limited ability to recognize basic words or comprehend written passages, often functioning below the expected literacy level for their age group.

Students categorized as frustrated or non-readers typically exhibit signs such as slow and hesitant reading, frequent pronunciation mistakes, skipping or adding words, and limited comprehension of texts. Emotionally, these students may feel anxious, embarrassed, or disinterested in reading, and often avoid reading-related activities. In extreme cases, they may even report physical symptoms—such as headaches or stomachaches—to escape tasks that involve oral reading.

A variety of factors contribute to these reading challenges. On the cognitive side, difficulties with phonological processing and memory can impact reading development. From an environmental perspective, issues such as economic hardship, limited access to reading materials, and lack of parental guidance also play a significant role (McGeown et al., 2020). In schools, factors such as overcrowded classrooms and the lack of personalized instruction exacerbate the situation. Moreover, assessment tools like the Phil-IRI, when used without adequate context or support, can unintentionally reinforce stigma by labeling students in ways that affect their identity and self-worth.

When students are classified as frustrated or non-readers, they often internalize these labels, which can diminish their self-confidence and willingness to participate in academic activities. The classification may go beyond identifying a skill gap—it may reinforce a belief that improvement is unlikely. Flippo (2014) underscores this when describing frustrated readers as those who find reading tasks so difficult that they are unable to meaningfully engage with them, emphasizing the disconnect between student ability and instructional expectations.

### *Reading Problems*

Several cognitive difficulties, particularly those related to decoding and phonemic awareness, have been found to impede reading proficiency (Kim et al., 2019). Alongside these, environmental factors—such as limited financial resources, lack of exposure to books, and minimal early reading experiences—are significant contributors to poor reading outcomes. These challenges are particularly evident in students classified as non-readers, often leading to educational inequities (McGeown et al., 2020).

The issue of reading difficulty remains a pressing concern in many developing nations, including the Philippines. Despite various literacy efforts, a substantial number of learners continue to struggle with basic reading skills (Bernardo & Calleja, 2022). In response to this issue, the Department of Education launched several reading initiatives, notably the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), designed to identify students' reading levels and inform instructional planning (DepEd, 2018). Although well-intentioned, such classification systems may have unintended effects. Students identified as "frustrated" or "non-readers" often experience negative labeling, which can lower their self-esteem and discourage active participation in learning (Santos, 2020).

### *Frustrated Readers and Non-Readers*

Frustrated and non-readers are the classifications labeled to struggling readers according to DepEd's Phil-IRI Assessment Tool. Frustrated readers, who possess basic decoding skills but struggle with fluency and comprehension, as well as non-readers who lack foundational reading abilities, often face compounded difficulties.

### *Reading Stigma and Its Impact on Students*

Goffman's (1963) theory on stigma explains that individuals with traits deemed socially undesirable are often labeled in ways that isolate and diminish their self-worth. In the context of education, this is evident among students with reading difficulties. Research by Smith et al. (2020) reveals that such students frequently experience feelings of shame and social isolation, which discourage them from participating in classroom activities or seeking help. Similarly, Jones et al. (2021) noted that the fear of being perceived as "slow" or incapable intensifies students' hesitation to engage in reading tasks. These findings underscore the profound psychological impact of labeling on learners, influencing not only their academic behavior but also their overall well-being.

One of the key concerns in this area is how reading assessment tools—like the Phil-IRI—can inadvertently reinforce fixed mindsets. Although these tools are designed to evaluate reading ability, their strict categories may lead students to internalize negative labels. According to Dweck (2017), such labeling can foster a belief that intelligence or ability is static, contributing to reading anxiety and reduced motivation. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory further emphasizes that interactions and social feedback shape learning. Repeated classification as a poor reader can lead learners to avoid reading altogether due to discomfort and a fear of judgment (Brown et al., 2021).

Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) also provides insight into the motivational consequences of stigma. When students feel their competence, autonomy, and sense of connection are threatened by negative labels, their intrinsic motivation is likely to diminish. Brown et al. (2021) also found that students who see themselves as weak readers often experience emotional distress—ranging from anxiety to depression. These negative emotions are often amplified by critical reactions from peers and teachers, making it increasingly difficult for these students to remain actively involved in classroom learning. Garcia and Roberts (2023) similarly observed that students facing reading struggles tend to withdraw from discussions, which in turn affects their confidence and academic development.

In response, DepEd has introduced various literacy programs, including Brigada Pagbasa (a community-based reading initiative) and the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP) (an early literacy development initiative). Research suggests that structured interventions, when combined with positive reinforcement and socio-emotional support, significantly improve reading skills (Yazon, 2022). However, these programs often focus primarily on skill-building rather than addressing the stigma and emotional challenges associated with reading difficulties, leaving a crucial gap in intervention strategies.

### ***Motivation Theories in Education***

Motivation plays a crucial role in how students engage with learning, particularly in the context of reading development. It shapes their willingness to take on challenges, their persistence in the face of difficulty, and their overall academic self-concept. Various well-established psychological theories provide a framework for understanding student motivation in educational settings.

One of the most widely recognized theories is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2000, 2020), which asserts that learners are more intrinsically motivated when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. In the case of struggling readers, these needs often go unmet. When students feel disconnected, incapable, or controlled—particularly after being labeled as poor readers—their drive to participate and improve tends to decline.

The Expectancy-Value Theory, proposed by Wigfield and Eccles (2000), also offers valuable insight. It suggests that a student's motivation hinges on how much they value a learning activity and how confident they are in their ability to succeed. If students see reading as difficult and unrewarding, especially those classified as frustrated or non-readers, they are less likely to engage. In contrast, when reading tasks are viewed as purposeful and within reach, students are more inclined to invest effort.

Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985) adds another layer by examining how learners interpret the causes of their success or failure. Those who believe their struggles stem from fixed traits, such as a lack of intelligence, may become discouraged. On the other hand, students who attribute reading challenges to factors they can change—such as effort or strategy—are more likely to stay motivated.

Achievement Goal Theory helps explain students' orientation toward learning. Those with a mastery goal orientation are focused on personal improvement and understanding, while those with a performance orientation are more concerned about how others judge their abilities. For struggling readers, especially in classrooms where public reading is common, a fear of embarrassment can discourage effort and participation (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006).

These motivational theories all point to a common understanding: student motivation is dynamic and influenced by their social and instructional environment. Teachers, therefore, have a powerful role in fostering motivation—especially for learners who feel stigmatized. By creating supportive and inclusive classrooms that encourage autonomy, self-confidence, and positive peer interactions, educators can help struggling readers stay engaged and confident.

### ***Interventions and Support for Struggling Readers***

Providing meaningful support for students who struggle with reading—particularly those identified as frustrated or non-readers—requires a comprehensive approach that attends to both their academic and emotional needs. Research highlights the importance of early detection and personalized instruction in preventing long-term learning setbacks (Snow et al., 1998). Successful reading interventions typically involve targeted instruction in phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension, all aligned to the learner's specific skill level.

One widely adopted approach is the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, which delivers tiered support based on the severity of students' reading difficulties. RTI includes early diagnostic screening, regular monitoring of progress, and differentiated instructional strategies that become more intensive as needed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). When applied consistently, this model helps prevent further academic delays and promotes measurable improvement.

Equally important is the influence of the classroom environment and the teacher's approach. Studies highlight that a non-threatening,

emotionally supportive classroom atmosphere plays a crucial role in encouraging struggling readers to re-engage. Teachers are encouraged to use scaffolded techniques, such as modeling reading strategies, conducting guided sessions, and differentiating lessons, to meet the diverse needs of their students. Creating a sense of community and belonging in the classroom also helps students feel more confident and less isolated (Allington, 2013). Verbal encouragement and positive reinforcement can significantly boost a student's motivation and willingness to read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

Parental involvement is another vital element in supporting literacy. Research suggests that when parents are equipped to help their children through home-based literacy activities—like story reading, asking reflective questions, or using educational games—children demonstrate not only improved reading performance but also more positive attitudes toward learning (Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Strengthening the relationship between home and school creates consistency and reduces the emotional burden that often accompanies reading struggles.

Technology has also become a helpful tool for delivering individualized reading support. Digital applications, when designed around research-based practices, provide engaging and adaptive activities that promote reading growth. These resources are particularly valuable in under-resourced environments, where they can supplement instruction and provide additional reading opportunities (Cheung & Slavin, 2013).

Despite the availability of these effective interventions, a significant barrier remains: the stigma associated with reading difficulties. This emotional and social dimension often leads to disengagement, highlighting the need for support programs that go beyond academics. To be truly effective, interventions must also prioritize the learner's emotional well-being and create spaces where struggling readers feel respected, safe, and hopeful.

**Synthesis.** Emerging studies suggest that reading challenges are not purely the result of individual learning issues or cognitive delays. Instead, they are also shaped by broader cultural, linguistic, and societal factors. In countries like the Philippines, where classrooms are often linguistically diverse, many students receive literacy instruction in a language that is not their first. Valerio et al. (2021) point out that such language mismatches can create reading difficulties that are sometimes misdiagnosed as cognitive limitations, when in fact the root problem lies in a misalignment between students' cultural-linguistic backgrounds and the medium of instruction.

Socioeconomic conditions also significantly influence literacy development. Children growing up in low-income families often lack access to books, reading materials, and other early literacy experiences that are essential for developing strong reading skills. Khong and Ng (2020) emphasize that when culturally relevant resources and alignment between home and school literacy practices are missing, the risk of reading failure increases. These inequalities are exacerbated in educational systems that prioritize standardized performance metrics without considering the diverse cultural and economic realities of learners, thereby further marginalizing those already at a disadvantage.

The literature reviewed in this study reflects a shared concern: while reading is essential to a student's academic success, many children—especially in countries like the Philippines—still struggle with developing strong reading skills. The Department of Education (DepEd) introduced tools like the Phil-IRI to help identify and support these students (DepEd, 2018). Although well-intentioned, these assessments may unintentionally place students into rigid categories such as "frustrated" or "non-reader." Research warns that labels like these can have a lasting emotional impact (Santos, 2020; Manalo & Ramos, 2021). When learners absorb these labels, they may begin to doubt their abilities, feel embarrassed in class, and withdraw from learning (Dweck, 2017; Lopez, 2020). Goffman's (1963) theory on stigma explains how public labeling can lead to exclusion, making learners feel invisible or incapable.

While national reading programs like Brigada Pagbasa and ECARP aim to build students' skills, they often overlook a critical aspect: how students feel. Studies show that many struggling readers carry emotional wounds—feelings of shame, fear, and rejection—especially when they are called out in front of others or quietly excluded from class activities (Smith et al., 2020; Clemente, 2022). These emotional burdens don't go away easily. If they're left unacknowledged, students may begin to disengage entirely. Theories by Bandura (1997) and Deci & Ryan (2000) remind us that motivation thrives when learners feel competent, connected, and in control. When those needs are unmet, students may shut down emotionally—choosing silence, skipping class, or even dropping out as a way to cope (Oracion, 2021). This shows us that teaching reading isn't just about skills—it's also about protecting the student's sense of self.

Although much has been written about how to teach reading, there remains a gap in understanding the emotional experiences of struggling readers. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how stigma is perceived by individuals labeled as "frustrated" or "non-readers" and how this experience influences their motivation. Rather than focusing solely on strategies or techniques, this research listens to the voices of students themselves—their fears, their frustrations, and their hopes. By doing so, it aims to inspire more caring and inclusive reading programs that support not only academic improvement but also emotional healing—especially for those who are often left behind.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to comprehensively explore the stigma



experienced by frustrated and non-readers and its impact on their motivation to learn. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate because the nature of the research problem required an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses—elements that cannot be adequately captured through numerical data. The study aimed to explore how struggling readers perceive and internalize stigma within the context of school and social interactions, necessitating an approach that emphasizes meaning-making, informant voice, and rich description. Through this design, the researcher was able to gather detailed narratives, identify recurring patterns, and develop emergent themes that provide meaningful insight into how stigma is felt in the daily academic lives of frustrated and non-readers, as well as its effects on their motivation.

**Participants**

The informants of this study were the frustrated and non-readers who were identified based on the results of the Pre-reading Test of Phil-IRI administered by the respective schools. They were students from Grade 7 to Grade 12 enrolled in the aforementioned DepEd secondary schools of Mainit District, Surigao del Norte Division.

The study involved thirty-six (36) students who were organized into six (6) focus groups. All informants voluntarily provided their informed consent to participate in the study. To ensure that every school contributes proportionally to the sample size, a stratified random sampling was utilized, enhancing the validity of the study. Moreover, the author requested the cooperation of the reading teachers from each school to provide the students' initial demographic information, their reading classification according to the results of the Pre-reading test of Phil-IRI, as well as to give initial feedback about their students' stigma on reading.

*Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Informants by School and Data Collection Method*

<i>Focus Group (and their School Name)</i>	<i>Reading Level (Based on PHIL-IRI)</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age Distribution</i>	<i>Self-Reported Family Income Class</i>
FGD 1: Hacienda National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class
FGD 2: Matin-ao National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class
FGD 3: Mainit National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class
FGD 4: Magpayang National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class
FGD 5: Paco National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class
FGD 6: Cantugas Cultural National High School	3=Frustrated Readers 3=Non-Readers	3= Males 3=Females	From 12-17 Years old	Low and Middle class

The distribution of informants, along with their demographic characteristics, is presented in Table 1. Each focus group consisted of 6 informants from every participating school. There were 3 frustrated readers and 3 non-readers in every FGD, either male or female, from ages 12-17. In addition, the informant's self-reported family income class was included in the data.

**Instrument**

The study employed an interview guide to collect data on the reading stigma experienced by frustrated and non-readers, as well as the effects of the stigma on their motivation. The interview guide featured three (3) open-ended questions available in Appendix A. These questions were designed to motivate students to openly and thoroughly share their thoughts on the topics. Moreover, it included the basic information of the informants, such as age, sex, year level, and reading classification (frustration level or non-reader).

The tool consisted of two primary sections: Section A, Felt Stigma, and Section B, Perceived Effects on Motivation. Some questions for Section A were adapted and modified from established measures, including the King's Stigma Scale. Some items for Section B were adapted and modified from the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ-R) by Wigfield & Guthrie (1997).

**Procedure**

To gather the data, the researcher obtained formal approval from the Dean of the Graduate School of Surigao del Norte State University. Once approved, a letter was sent to the Division office of Surigao del Norte and the administrators of the Public Secondary Schools in the Mainit District, requesting permission to conduct the study. Reading teachers at the schools were asked to provide the Pre-test Phil-IRI results of the identified students who were classified as frustrated readers and non-readers.

Data was collected through six (6) focus group discussions (FGDs). Each FGD lasted approximately 30-60 minutes, and informants were asked follow-up questions so they could share their experiences freely and thoroughly. This was audio-recorded and was transcribed for thematic analysis. After the analysis, a summary of the results was shared and communicated to the schools involved through presentations or reports.

**Data Analysis**

The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First is the

familiarization with the data. The researcher immersed herself in the raw data by thoroughly reading and listening to the transcripts from six focus group discussions (FGD1–FGD6). This phase involved identifying initial impressions and emotionally charged language, which helped the researcher understand the context and experiences of frustrated and non-readers. Repeated readings allowed early recognition of recurring experiences, emotions, and reactions related to reading stigma.

**Generating Initial Codes (Significant Statements).** The key responses of the informants were extracted and labeled as significant statements. These included direct quotations that conveyed meaningful insights about students' feelings and experiences. Each of these codes represented a raw data point that reflected how students experienced stigma or responded to it emotionally.

These significant statements and phrases were written in a separate sheet (Appendix B) and coded based on their transcript and the informant's code numbers. Each response was distilled into significant statements from which formulated meanings were derived.

**Formulated Meanings.** Each significant statement was then interpreted to develop its formulated meaning—a brief explanation of what the statement revealed about the student's experience. For example, "Maulaw ko kung pabasahon" ("I feel embarrassed when I'm asked to read aloud.") was interpreted as "Shame is experienced during reading tasks," while "Dili ko ganahan moeskwela" ("I don't want to go to school.") reflected "Stigma discourages school attendance and participation." These formulated meanings were critical in bridging raw data with deeper analytical insight.

**Clustering themes.** The formulated meanings were grouped based on similarity and relevance to form clustered themes. For instance, meanings related to shame, fear, and ridicule were clustered under "Peer Judgment and Teasing" and "Oral Reading Anxiety." This phase involved reviewing whether the clustered themes captured the core of multiple meanings and were distinct from one another, ensuring a strong thematic foundation.

From the clustered themes, broader emergent themes were synthesized to capture the overarching patterns in how stigma was felt and how it affected motivation. For example, themes such as Emotional Pain Rooted in Public Exposure and Judgment, Withdrawal and Detachment as Protective Mechanisms, and Desire for Individualized and Compassionate Support emerged. Each theme was named to reflect its central idea and to ensure clarity and consistency in addressing the research questions.

The final emergent themes were organized and presented in thematic tables and narrative form in the results and discussion chapters. Each theme was supported with significant statements and interpreted through the lens of Goffman's Stigma Theory and Self-Determination Theory.

The analysis, done several times by the researcher and fellow teacher-experts, was guided by the conceptual framework and research questions. The results were then condensed in the thematic map, encapsulating the students' experiences of reading stigma, as well as the effects of such experiences on their motivation.

### **Ethical Consideration**

This study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure the welfare and data protection of all informants involved. The following protocols were noted:

**Informed Consent.** Every informant, accompanied by their parent or guardian, was provided with a clear, detailed, and informed consent form. This form outlined the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, the possible risks and benefits, and the rights of the informant, including their option to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any repercussions. The informant cannot be involved without their signed consent.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity.** The study followed the Data Privacy Act to ensure the protection and privacy of the informant. Along the way, their identities were anonymized using codes or pseudonyms in all data records and published results. Their details and information were kept with utmost confidentiality.

**Voluntary Participation.** The participation of the informants was completely voluntary. They were assured that their involvement would not affect their academic standing or relationships within their school community.

**Topic Sensitivity.** Recognizing the delicate nature of the topic, especially the possible emotional discomfort associated with the discussions of stigma, the study created a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere. In the event of discomfort, a guidance counselor would be invited during data collection to address the issue.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the results and discussion of the study. It followed the thematic approach, drawing significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering them into themes, and deriving emergent themes to answer the research questions.

The final thematic maps developed for this study are presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3, illustrating the answers to the research questions: how is stigma perceived by frustrated and non-readers, and what is the perceived effect of the felt stigma on their motivation?

The thematic map in Figure 1 illustrates how stigma is deeply ingrained in social interactions, educational practices, and systemic

structures. It shows that stigma is not only externally imposed but also internalized, leading to both emotional pain and behavioral withdrawal—a combination that significantly hampers literacy development and academic engagement.

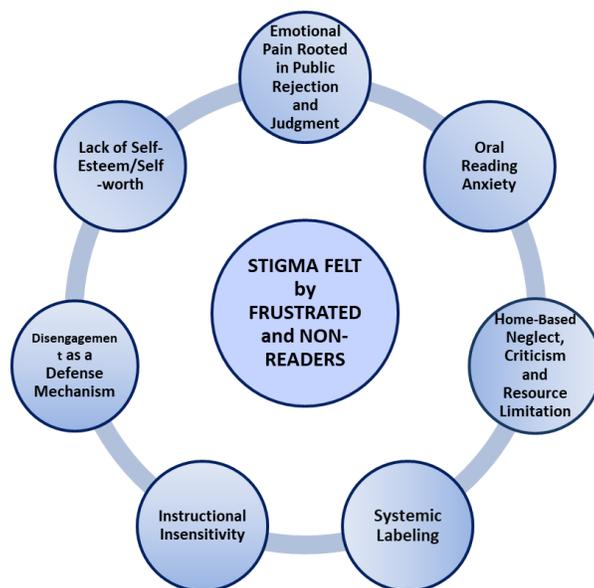


Figure 1. *Thematic Map of the Stigma Felt by Frustrated and Non-Readers*

Emotional Pain Rooted in Public Exposure and Judgment. This was the most dominant theme across all focus group discussions. Students reported feelings of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation when asked to read aloud, especially when they struggled to pronounce words or read fluently. Peer laughter, teacher correction, and negative labeling were consistent triggers.

*"Tumatawa ang mga classmates kapag di ka nakabasa."* (FGD2)

*("Classmates laugh when you can't read.")*

*"Sakitan kung ingnon nga high school na, pero dili pa kabasa."* (FGD6)

*("It hurts when they say you're already in high school, but still can't read.")*

These experiences align with Goffman's (1963) Stigma Theory, which explains how individuals internalize socially imposed judgments. Students began to view themselves as "less capable," which affected their willingness to engage in classroom activities. This stigma was compounded by public assessments like the Phil-IRI, which visibly identified their reading level and contributed to social comparison.

Oral Reading Anxiety. This theme is largely due to overwhelming nervousness and fear that students experience whenever they are required to read in front of others. Phrases such as: "Kulbaan ug mahadlok nga basin mangatawa sila" (FGD5) ("I get nervous and scared that they might laugh.") illustrate how even the anticipation of making a mistake can result in anxiety. The fear of being laughed at creates a hostile reading environment, where students associate reading with humiliation rather than learning. Oral reading becomes a traumatic rather than educational task, further discouraging participation. Additionally, oral reading anxiety is felt when negative comments about speaking are hurled at the students. The following statement says it all:

*"Maulaw ko basin mali pag pronounce unya kataw-an."* (FGD5) *("I'm embarrassed that I might mispronounce words and get laughed at.")*

The statement above speaks of a student's need to improve in speaking, but so afraid of embarrassment. The anxiety stems from ridicule due to a specific microskill, namely pronunciation. The inability to articulate words, seemingly due to a lack of proper instruction on this skill, is a problem that needs to be addressed.

Home-Based Neglect, Criticism, and Resource Limitation. Many students described reading as a technically difficult task, due to limited vocabulary, poor decoding skills, and the absence of reading practice or support at home. The following sample explains the detail:

*"Wala man nagtudlo sa ako sa balay, busy man ako mama."* (FGD6)

*("No one teaches me at home because my mother is busy.")*

This theme underscores that stigma is not only socially constructed but also rooted in real academic struggles. These challenges create a cycle in which reading becomes both a cognitive and emotional burden. Without intervention, such as the help of family members or

parents, struggling readers are left to face these difficulties alone, often reinforcing their self-doubt and shame.

Moreover, children who are not provided with the necessary resources for their schooling tend to become frustrated and feel neglected by their family members, particularly their parents. The statement is another proof:

*"Wala ko gana kay wala mi libro sa balay." (FGD3)*

*("I have no interest because we don't have books at home.")*

This response implies that students need the support of their homes in terms of the resources they require in school.

**Instructional Insensitivity.** Some teachers unintentionally contribute to stigma by correcting students harshly or emphasizing their weaknesses. A participant shared that being told "Pagpraktis ug basa kay high school na ka" ("Practice reading because you're already in high school.") was not encouraging, but was like a public scolding. Such remarks, although factual, trigger feelings of shame and pressure.

Instructional insensitivity, usually done by teachers, fails to consider students' emotional readiness and may reinforce the label of being a poor reader, making them reluctant to participate. This problem highlights the need to revisit the teachers' role in addressing the emotional needs of students.

**Lack of Self-Esteem and Self-Worth.** The cumulative effects of judgment, criticism, and exclusion have a profound impact on how students perceive themselves. One student revealed-

*"Baba na ako pagtan-aw nako sa ako kaugalingon" (FGD5).*

*("I feel low when I look at myself.")*

This shows that reading stigma erodes self-confidence. The persistent message that they are "not good enough" leads to self-labeling and internalized stigma. As students start to believe these labels, they withdraw, participate less, and begin to view academic success as unattainable. This result is supported by Team Vathana (2023), saying that when students internalize negative attitudes towards themselves or their peers, it can damage their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall well-being. This can manifest in various ways, including academic underachievement, social isolation, and a reluctance to seek help when needed.

**Disengagement as a Defense Mechanism.** As a result of recurring stigma, many students resorted to protective behaviors, such as silence, absence, avoidance, and, in some cases, a desire to stop attending school altogether. The following statements were noted:

*"Usahay muoli nalang ko." (FGD6)*

*("Sometimes I just go home.")*

*"Gusto ra kan ko mo-undang." (FGD6)*

*("I just want to quit.")*

The statements indicate a firm backing out of its desire to stay in class. Learning here is no longer the students' goal; it rather sends a message that they prefer to withdraw and avoid others in school to preserve their sanity and protect themselves.

These findings are strongly supported by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that individuals disengage when their basic psychological needs (competence, relatedness, autonomy) are not met. The stigma experienced in the classroom led to a lack of these supportive conditions, causing students to emotionally and physically withdraw from learning environments.

**Systemic Labeling** emerged as a significant theme that captures how institutional practices—particularly reading assessments like the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI)—can unintentionally reinforce stigma among frustrated and non-readers. One participant shared,

*"Phil-IRI kay ginakabalo dayon kung pilay level sa bata" ("With Phil-IRI, they immediately know what level the student is"),*

This statement reflects a sense of unease with how quickly and visibly students are being classified. This reveals that learners are highly aware of the labels assigned to them, which are often perceived as fixed judgments rather than growth-oriented feedback.

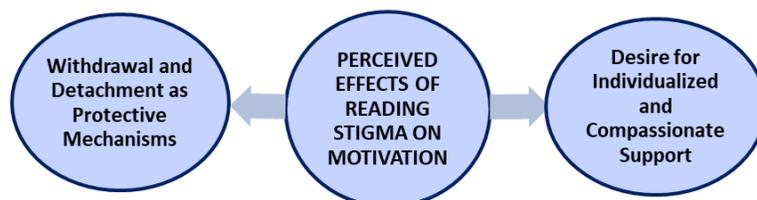


Figure 2. Thematic Map of the Perceived Effects of Stigma on Frustrated and Non-Readers' Motivation

The themes that sprang from the significant statements of the respondents include the following:

**Withdrawal and Detachment as Protective Mechanisms.** This theme captures the psychological and behavioral retreat of students who feel stigmatized. Instead of confronting the reading challenges, students resort to silence, avoidance, absenteeism, or even express a desire to quit school entirely. These behaviors are not symptoms of laziness, but forms of emotional self-preservation in the face of continued public judgment or failure. The following raw statements say it all:

*"Dili ko ganahan moeskwela." (FGD3)*

*("I don't want to go to school.")*

*"Gusto ra kan ko mo-undang." (FGD6)*

*("I just want to quit.")*

*"Dili ko ganahan mosulat ug mobasa." (FGD6)*

*("I don't want to write or read.")*

The accounts show demotivation and avoidance of school participation due to stigma. The desire to drop out is rooted in emotional exhaustion and persistent labeling. They are statements of surrender, renunciation, and refusal to do what they ought to do.

Theoretical backing from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that when students' basic needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are not met, they are more likely to disengage from academic activities.

**Desire for Individualized and Compassionate Support.** Despite their negative experiences, a significant number of students expressed a strong willingness to improve, provided that they received support in a non-threatening and encouraging way. The following statements speak of it:

*"Kung ingnon ka ni Ma'am nga proud sya..." (FGD3)*

*("When Ma'am says she's proud of you...")*

*"Kanang tabangan ka dili kay kataw-an o paulawan." (FGD6)*

*("When you're helped, not laughed at or humiliated.")*

*"Tagaan ug sayon nga mga basahon ug tudloan." (FGD5)*

*("Given simple reading materials and taught properly.")*

This emergent theme reflects the possibility of re-engagement, particularly when teachers provide emotional safety, simplified reading materials, and time for practice. It affirms the relatedness and competence components of SDT: motivation can be restored through trusting, respectful relationships and confidence-building instructional strategies.

This result aligns with Buscaglia's (2020) assertion that compassionate support in schools involves fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and kindness, both within the classroom and the broader school community. This approach focuses on recognizing students' individual needs, fostering positive relationships, and promoting mental well-being.

### Summary of Themes

The interplay between the causes, feelings, and effects of stigma reveals a multi-layered dynamic: social feedback (from peers, teachers, and parents) and structural tools (like assessments) contribute to an environment where frustrated and non-readers feel exposed. In response, they withdraw—but not because they have no desire to learn. Instead, they disengage as a form of emotional self-protection.

Yet, even within this emotionally charged environment, students show hope—hope that, with compassionate instruction, empathy, and safe classroom practices, they can regain the motivation and confidence to learn.

Figure 3 visually synthesizes the relationship between the felt stigma of frustrated and non-readers and the perceived effects of that stigma on their motivation. The thematic map presents an integrated view of how students' negative reading experiences—whether through public embarrassment, harsh feedback, or lack of support—form a cycle of emotional injury and protective withdrawal.

Seven themes illustrate the nature of the stigma experienced: Emotional Pain Rooted in Public Rejection and Judgment, Oral Reading Anxiety, Home-Based Neglect, Criticism, and Resource Limitation, Instructional Insensitivity, Systemic Labeling, Lack of Self-Esteem and Self-Worth, and Disengagement as a Defense Mechanism. These represent both internal and external sources of stigma. For example, peer ridicule and public correction make students feel humiliated and incompetent, while unsupportive homes and assessment labels reinforce their sense of inadequacy.

These felt stigmas give rise to two dominant motivational outcomes: Withdrawal and Detachment as Protective Mechanisms and Desire for Individualized and Compassionate Support. While students frequently respond to stigma by disengaging—avoiding tasks, staying

silent, or skipping school—many also express hope and readiness to improve, provided they are met with patience, understanding, and scaffolding.

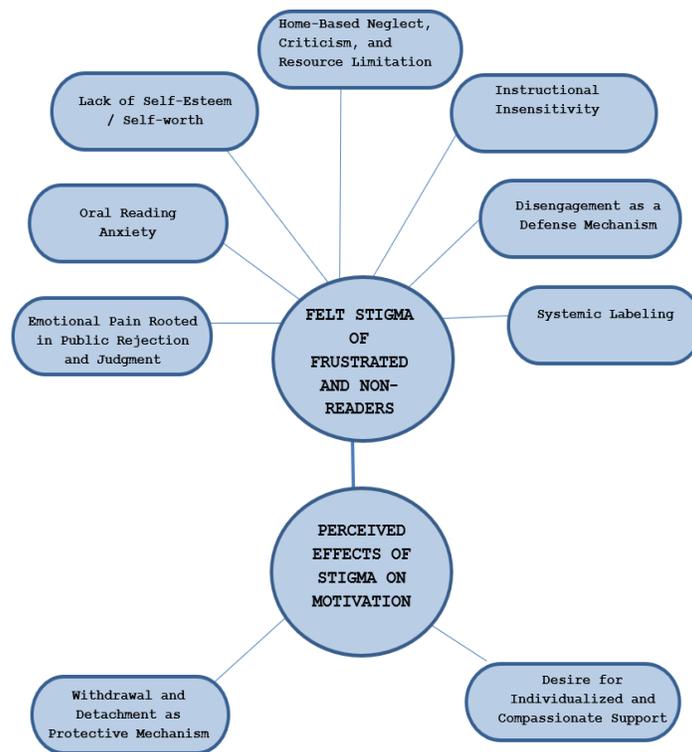


Figure 3. *Thematic Map of the Felt Stigma of Frustrated and Non-readers and the Perceived Effects on their Motivation*

The map emphasizes the interplay between emotional experiences and behavioral responses, showing that motivation among struggling readers is not absent—it is simply suppressed by fear and shame. Unlocking it requires dismantling the stigma through more empathetic and student-centered teaching approaches.

## Conclusions

Based on the results and findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn in relation to the experiences of frustrated and non-readers in Mainit:

The learners of Mainit who struggle with reading face significant stigma, both in school and at home. Their experiences are marked by embarrassment, fear of judgment, and emotional pain, which contribute to a lack of self-esteem and a tendency to detach from academic and social activities as a coping mechanism.

This stigma leads to a range of negative consequences for students, including avoidance of reading tasks, silence in the classroom, absenteeism, and, in some cases, a desire to stop attending school. Despite these behaviors, the students expressed an intense longing for understanding, encouragement, and compassionate support from their teachers, classmates, and families.

The learners of Mainit do not lack ability—they lack belief in themselves, often due to years of discouragement and mislabeling. When provided with a safe and empathetic learning environment, personalized instruction, and patience, these students demonstrate the willingness and potential to improve. With the right support, they can overcome their reading difficulties and re-engage in their education with confidence and motivation.

In light of the findings, the experiences of frustrated and non-readers in Mainit call for a more holistic, compassionate, and locally responsive approach to literacy instruction. Addressing reading difficulties among Mainitnon learners requires not only academic interventions but also emotional, social, and community-based support. To reduce stigma and rekindle motivation, schools and stakeholders in Mainit must build a learning culture rooted in empathy, encouragement, and respect. The following recommendations are proposed:

**Foster Emotionally Safe Classrooms in Mainit Schools.** Teachers in Mainit should create classroom environments that prioritize psychological safety. Avoiding public correction, especially during oral reading, and celebrating small wins can help build student confidence. Reading activities should be designed to lower anxiety—such as through small-group reading or paired sharing—rather than public performance. Students must feel that mistakes are part of learning, not moments for ridicule.

**Provide Personalized and Scaffolded Reading Interventions.** Schools in Mainit should strengthen their reading support systems by tailoring instruction to the needs of each learner. Struggling readers, especially those identified as frustrated or non-readers, benefit from leveled texts, slower pacing, and consistent one-on-one or small group instruction. The local context should also be considered—materials in mother tongue or familiar contexts may enhance comprehension and comfort.

**Equip Teachers with Stigma-Sensitive Training.** Professional development initiatives should include training on how stigma affects learner behavior and motivation. Teachers in Mainit must be supported in recognizing emotional withdrawal, responding with compassion, and shifting from labeling students to nurturing them. Practical, culturally appropriate strategies for inclusive teaching should be integrated into ongoing capacity-building programs.

**Humanize Reading Assessments Like the Phil-IRI.** Assessment tools such as the Phil-IRI must be used with care and purpose. Schools in Mainit should ensure that these assessments do not publicly label students or reduce them to a reading level. Instead, reading data must be used constructively—with a clear plan for how students will be supported to improve, grow, and feel hopeful about their progress.

**Involve Parents and Guardians in Reading Progress.** Home and school partnerships in Mainit should be strengthened. Parents and guardians must be guided on how to support their children's reading development with kindness and without judgment. Schools can provide localized reading materials to bring home, along with instructions, guide sheets, or even parent orientations, which help build their confidence as literacy partners.

**Encourage Peer-Based Reading Support.** Mainit schools can implement reading buddy programs or peer mentoring systems to create a more encouraging social environment for struggling readers. Fluent readers can be trained to support their classmates through shared reading, vocabulary games, or listening circles—helping to replace ridicule with community.

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