

Honors Without Literacy: A Narrative Review of the Reading and English Proficiency Gap Across the Senior High School–Tertiary Transition in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This narrative critical-integrative review examines the paradox in Philippine education wherein learners graduate from senior high school (SHS) with academic honors yet enter tertiary education with substantial difficulties in independent reading and academic English. It synthesizes published and policy literature to determine the extent, causes, and consequences of this literacy gap. Guided by the SANRA quality criteria for narrative reviews, the review examined peer-reviewed studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar; PISA 2018 and 2022 results; World Bank learning-poverty estimates; national assessment data, including ELLNA, NAT, and Phil-IRI; and EDCOM 2 reports published from 2015 to 2026. Evidence was synthesized thematically and interpreted

through Stanovich’s Matthew effect, Cummins’s BICS–CALP distinction, Spence’s signalling theory, and Campbell’s law. Four interrelated themes emerged: reading deficits begin early and accumulate across grade levels; grading, promotion, and score-transmutation practices can weaken the relationship between academic credentials and demonstrated competence; inconsistent language-of-instruction policies and insufficient exposure to academic English may limit the development of academic language proficiency; and the SHS–tertiary transition lacks a shared literacy standard capable of identifying and addressing accumulated deficits. Consequently, literacy difficulties may persist into higher education despite favorable report-card grades and academic distinctions. The review reframes the issue as a systemic credential–competence gap rather than solely an individual learner deficiency and proposes a conceptual framework and research agenda for strengthening literacy assessment, transition mechanisms, grading practices, and language policy across the basic-to-higher education continuum.

Keywords: *literacy gap, grade inflation, senior high school, transition to higher education, English proficiency, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Schooling and learning are not the same thing. Pritchett (2013) captured this in the phrase “schooling ain’t learning,” and the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2018* named the resulting condition a global learning crisis (World Bank, 2018). The Philippines is one of its sharpest cases. In PISA 2018, Filipino 15-year-olds recorded the lowest mean reading score among 79 participating systems (OECD, 2019). In PISA 2022 the mean rose only from 340 to 347, a change the OECD judged statistically indistinguishable from 2018, and about 24% of students reached the minimum reading benchmark of Level

2 (OECD, 2023). The World Bank (2022) estimated that 91% of Filipino children at late primary age cannot read and understand a simple, age-appropriate text.

These figures describe children and adolescents. Less attention has been paid to what happens when the same cohorts arrive at the door of higher education carrying diplomas, medals and honors. Recent national data suggest the deficit does not shrink with schooling; it widens. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM 2, 2026) reported that the share of learners rated proficient falls from about 30% in Grade 3 to under 1% in Grade 12. In 2026 the Department of Education (DepEd) acknowledged that only about 12.6% of roughly 1.4 million Grade 11 learners assessed were independent readers (Apacible, 2026). At the same time, graduation honors have become common at both basic and tertiary levels, and EDCOM 2 has warned that grading and promotion practices “inflate reported achievement” (Inquirer, 2026).

Author Positionality

This review is written from the standpoint of an educator who taught in a public senior high school and then moved to a state college. In both settings the author met learners who could not decode text fluently, and others who could decode but not comprehend. The most striking pattern appeared during routine first-year admission and advising: entrants who had graduated from SHS *with high honors* or *with highest honors* struggled to speak and write in English at the level that college coursework assumes.

These observations are reported here only as the reflexive origin of the inquiry, in keeping with the practice of declaring researcher positionality in qualitative and interpretive scholarship (Holmes, 2020). They are not treated as data. No human participants were recruited, no interviews are analyzed, and no claims rest on the author’s classroom experience. The review instead asks whether the published and official evidence corroborates, qualifies, or contradicts what practitioners report.

Problem and Purpose

The Philippine literature on literacy has grown rapidly since 2019, but it is fragmented. Studies of early-grade reading rarely follow learners into SHS. Studies of grade inflation focus on Latin honors at elite universities. Studies of English proficiency are often small, single-site surveys of college freshmen. Policy reports, though rich in data, are seldom synthesized in the international peer-reviewed literature. As a result, there is no integrated account of how a reading deficit that starts in Grade 1 can coexist with honors at Grade 12 and surface as an English proficiency problem in Year 1 of college.

This review addresses that gap. Its purpose is to synthesize evidence across the basic-to-higher education pipeline and to propose a conceptual explanation of the *credential–competence gap*: the distance between what a learner’s academic record certifies and what the learner can actually do with written and spoken academic language.

Research Questions

1. What does the evidence from 2015 to 2026 show about the scale and trajectory of reading and English-language deficits among Filipino learners from the early grades through senior high school?
2. What does the literature reveal about the relationship between grading, promotion and honors practices and learners’ demonstrated literacy?
3. Which linguistic, pedagogical and structural factors does the literature identify as causes of the gap?
4. How does the gap manifest at the SHS–tertiary transition, and what does it imply for higher education institutions, especially state universities and colleges (SUCs)?

Contribution

The review makes three contributions. Empirically, it brings together international, national and peer-reviewed evidence that is usually read in isolation. Theoretically, it integrates four lenses (the Matthew effect in reading, the BICS–CALP distinction, signalling theory and Campbell’s law) into one model of how competence and credentials drift apart. Practically, it identifies points in the pipeline where policy and institutional action can close the gap, and sets out a research agenda for doing so.

METHODS

Review Design

The study is a narrative review with a critical-integrative orientation. A narrative design suits the aims because the evidence is heterogeneous: large-scale assessments, government statistics, legislation, peer-reviewed empirical studies and theoretical work cannot be pooled statistically, but they can be interpreted together (Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). An integrative stance allows the review to build a new conceptual model rather than only summarize prior findings (Torraco, 2016).

To address the common criticism that narrative reviews are unsystematic, the review was planned and reported against the six items of the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA): justification of importance, statement of aims, description of the literature search, referencing, scientific reasoning, and appropriate presentation of data (Baethge et al., 2019). The search was documented with enough detail to be repeated.

Sources and Search Strategy

Four streams of evidence were searched (Table 1).

Table 1. *Evidence streams searched*

Stream	Sources searched	Purpose
Peer-reviewed literature	Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar	Empirical and theoretical studies on reading, English proficiency, grading and transition
International assessments	OECD PISA 2018 and 2022 reports and country notes; World Bank learning-poverty briefs	Cross-national benchmarks of reading
National data and policy	EDCOM 2 reports (2024, 2025, 2026); DepEd orders and assessment releases (ELLNA, NAT, Phil-IRI); PIDS discussion papers and policy notes; Republic Acts 10533 and 12027	System-level trends, grading rules, language policy
Grey literature (context only)	Reputable national news reporting of official data	Locating recent official releases not yet in journals; always traced to the originating agency where possible

Search strings combined three concept blocks with Boolean operators: (“reading” OR “literacy” OR “reading comprehension” OR “non-reader” OR “English proficiency” OR “academic writing”) AND (“senior high school” OR “K to 12” OR “college freshmen” OR “first-year” OR “transition to higher education”) AND (“Philippines” OR “Filipino”). A second string replaced the first block with (“grade inflation” OR “mass promotion” OR “honors” OR “grading system” OR “transmutation”). Backward and forward citation chasing was applied to key sources.

Eligibility Criteria

Sources were included if they (a) were published between January 2015 and June 2026, a window that spans the first SHS cohort (2016) to the EDCOM 2 final report; (b) addressed reading, writing or

English proficiency, grading or promotion, language of instruction, or the SHS–college transition; (c) concerned Filipino learners, or offered theory or comparative evidence directly applicable to them; and (d) were written in English or Filipino. Seminal theoretical works published earlier (e.g., Cummins, 1979; Spence, 1973; Stanovich, 1986) were admitted as theoretical anchors.

Sources were excluded if they were opinion pieces without data, institutional theses not publicly available, or studies whose sampling and instruments were not described. News reports were used only to locate and date official releases and are flagged as such in the text.

Composition of the Reviewed Corpus

Consistent with the conventions of narrative and integrative reviews, the search was iterative rather than a single exhaustive run, and a PRISMA flow diagram was therefore not used (Baethge et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019). Instead, the final corpus is reported transparently by source type (Table 2). The synthesis drew on 38 sources, supported by six methodological references that guided the review procedure.

Table 2. *Composition of the reviewed corpus*

Source type	Number	Examples
International large-scale assessments and agency reports	6	OECD (2019, 2023); UNICEF & SEAMEO (2020); World Bank (2018, 2022, 2023)
National commission and policy research reports	6	EDCOM 2 (2024, 2025, 2026); Abrigo & Orbeta (2023); Abrigo et al. (2026); PBed (2026)
Peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual studies	6	Bernardo (2004); Graham & Perin (2007); Metila et al. (2016); Orbeta & Potestad (2025); Shanahan & Shanahan (2008); Tupas (2015)
International research reports on grade inflation	3	ACT (2026); Gershenson (2018); Sanchez & Moore (2022)
Legal and policy instruments	6	RA 10533; RA 10931; RA 12027; DepEd Orders No. 8, s. 2015 and No. 36, s. 2016; CHED CMO No. 20, s. 2013
Theoretical anchors	6	Campbell (1979); Cummins (1979, 2008); Pritchett (2013); Spence (1973); Stanovich (1986)
Press reports of official releases and commentary	5	Apacible (2026); David (2022); DZRH News (n.d.); Inquirer (2026); The POST (2026)
Total synthesized	38	

Press reports were admitted only where they documented the release of official government data not yet available in a primary publication, and commentary was used only to represent positions in a public debate, not as evidence of outcomes.

Appraisal and Synthesis

Each empirical source was appraised for transparency of sampling, validity of the literacy measure used, and representativeness. National and international assessment data were given greater evidentiary weight than single-site studies. Where sources disagreed, for example on whether a 75% proficiency cut-off is too strict, the disagreement is reported rather than resolved by selection.

Synthesis followed reflexive thematic analysis applied to texts (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Sources were coded inductively, codes were grouped into candidate themes, and themes were refined against the four research questions. Four themes were retained and are presented in Sections 3 to 6. The themes were then interpreted through the theoretical framework described in Section 7.

Ethical Statement

The study analyzed only published and publicly released documents. It involved no human participants, no personal data and no intervention, and therefore did not require review by a research ethics board.

RESULTS

Theme 1: A Deficit That Begins Early and Compounds

The first finding is that the reading problem seen in SHS and college classrooms is neither new nor local. It is the visible end of a deficit that starts in the primary grades and grows as learners advance.

International Benchmarks

Three independent international measures converge. In the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019, only 10% of Filipino Grade 5 pupils met the minimum reading standard expected at the end of primary school, and only 1% could write cohesive texts with detailed ideas and appropriate vocabulary (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2020). The World Bank (2022) placed learning poverty, the share of 10-year-olds unable to read and understand a simple text, at 91%, among the highest in East Asia and the Pacific. In PISA 2018, the Philippines had the lowest reading mean of 79 systems (OECD, 2019). PISA 2022 showed a mean of 347 against an OECD average of 476, with almost no students reaching Level 5 and about 24% reaching Level 2 or above (OECD, 2023).

The consistency matters. These assessments differ in age group, format and sponsor, yet each places most Filipino learners below the threshold needed to learn independently from text. The finding is therefore unlikely to be an artefact of one instrument.

National Assessments Across Key Stages

National data show the same pattern and add a longitudinal dimension. The EDCOM 2 final report, *Turning Point: A Decade of Necessary Reforms*, compiled key-stage results from the Early Language, Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA) and the National Achievement Test (NAT) for 2023–2025 (EDCOM 2, 2026). Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3. *Share of learners proficient or highly proficient by key stage*

Key stage	Assessment	Proficient or highly proficient
Grade 3	ELLNA 2024	30.52%
Grade 6	NAT 2024	19.56%
Grade 10	NAT	0.74%–1.36%
Grade 12	NAT SY 2023–2024	about 0.40%–0.47%

Note. Sources: EDCOM 2 (2026); The POST (2026); PBE (2026). Grade 10 and Grade 12 values are reported as ranges because published releases of the same data differ.

At Grade 12, Philippine Business for Education’s analysis of DepEd data placed 65.6% of NAT examinees at the lowest band (“low emerging”) and only 0.02% at “highly proficient” (PBE, 2026). Reading-specific data are equally stark. A DepEd assessment of about 1.4 million Grade 11 learners in early 2026 found that only 12.58% read independently; the rest needed support at the instructional or frustration level (Apacible, 2026). DepEd officials stated that the problem did not originate in SHS but reflects deficits accumulated across schooling.

A Necessary Caveat on Measurement

The sharpness of the decline depends partly on where proficiency is set. DepEd classifies a learner as proficient at a mean percentage score of 75% or above. A Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) study commissioned by EDCOM 2 noted that alternative standard-setting methods would classify more learners as proficient, implying that the 75% cut-off may be stringent (The POST, 2026). The NAT for Grade 12 also measures broad 21st-century competencies rather than reading alone.

These caveats temper the precise percentages but not the direction of the evidence. Even under a gentler standard, PISA, SEA-PLM, the World Bank indicator and the Grade 11 reading assessment all point the same way. The defensible conclusion is that a large majority of Filipino learners complete basic education without the independent reading ability that tertiary study requires.

Why The Gap Widens: The Matthew Effect

The widening between Grade 3 and Grade 12 is what reading theory predicts. Stanovich (1986) described a “Matthew effect” in which early decoding difficulties reduce the amount a child reads, which slows vocabulary and background-knowledge growth, which in turn makes later texts harder still. Small early gaps therefore become large later ones. EDCOM 2’s own Year Two report found Grade 3 learners performing at Grade 1 levels, already one to two years behind (EDCOM 2, 2025). A learner who leaves the early grades unable to read fluently enters an SHS curriculum that assumes independent reading of disciplinary texts, and the distance between learner and curriculum grows each year.

Theme 2: The Honors Paradox — When Grades Stop Measuring Literacy

The second finding explains the practitioner’s surprise. In the Philippine system, a high general average and an honors title are weak evidence of reading or English proficiency, because grading and award rules allow marks to rise independently of demonstrated skill.

How the Rules Permit Decoupling

Three features of DepEd policy are relevant. First, under the K to 12 classroom assessment policy (DepEd Order No. 8, s. 2015), raw scores are transmuted onto a scale whose floor is well above zero. EDCOM 2’s analysis found that an initial grade of 60 is transmuted to 75, the passing mark (EDCOM 2, 2026). Very low raw performance can therefore appear as a pass or near-pass, and modest performance can appear as a high grade.

Second, DepEd Order No. 36, s. 2016 replaced the older practice of naming the top ten learners in a class with a criterion-referenced award. Any learner with a general average of 90 to 94 graduates *With Honors*, 95 to 97 *With High Honors*, and 98 to 100 *With Highest Honors*, with no cap on the number of awardees (DepEd, 2016). The policy’s stated aim was to reward attainment of standards rather than rank. Its unintended effect is that the number of honor graduates rises automatically whenever grades rise, whatever the cause.

Third, promotion practice reinforces the drift. EDCOM 2 documented a “de facto mass promotion” in which teachers face administrative pressure to pass learners who lack prerequisite skills, and it recommended an immediate end to the practice and a phaseout of grade transmutation (EDCOM 2, 2026; Inquirer, 2026). Teachers consulted by the commission reported difficulty explaining to parents why a child who could not read independently had nonetheless passed.

The Evidence of Divergence

The most direct evidence is the contrast between reported grades and measured proficiency. EDCOM 2 concluded that report-card grades have increasingly diverged from the skills learners display, and that these practices “inflate reported achievement” and weaken the evidence on which reform rests (Inquirer, 2026). Placed beside Section 3, the picture is stark. A system in which under 1% of Grade 12

examinees reach NAT proficiency, and about one in eight Grade 11 learners reads independently, still produces large numbers of graduates whose general averages exceed 90.

Grade inflation is not confined to basic education. Philippine commentary has documented a sharp rise in Latin honors at the University of the Philippines after the COVID-19 pandemic, partly linked to emergency “no-fail” grading policies (David, 2022). Whether this reflects inflation or genuinely better-prepared K to 12 cohorts is contested, and the review records both positions. The relevant point for this study is narrower: honors at any level are now a less reliable signal of literacy than they were assumed to be.

Comparative Evidence

The Philippine pattern is consistent with international findings. In the United States, high school grade point averages rose while standardized test scores were flat or falling, so that grades became less predictive of college readiness (Gershenson, 2018; Sanchez & Moore, 2022). An ACT study found that grade inflation was associated with a growing share of students whose high GPA was not matched by their test performance (ACT, 2026). These students often struggle after enrollment, which mirrors what Philippine college teachers report.

Interpretation: Signalling and Campbell’s Law

Two theories explain why decoupling is predictable. Signalling theory holds that credentials are valuable because they convey information about ability that employers and institutions cannot observe directly (Spence, 1973). When grades and honors are awarded too freely, the signal loses information: a college admissions officer can no longer infer reading ability from “With High Honors.”

Campbell’s law states that the more a quantitative indicator is used for social decision-making, the more it is subject to corruption pressures and the more it distorts the process it is meant to monitor (Campbell, 1979). Promotion rates, passing rates and numbers of honor graduates are used to evaluate teachers and schools. The predictable response is pressure to raise the indicator rather than the underlying learning. This is a system effect, not a moral failing of individual teachers, and the review treats it as such.

Theme 3: Language of Instruction and the Missing Academic English

The third finding concerns English specifically. The literature suggests that many Filipino learners acquire enough English for everyday interaction and test items but not the cognitive-academic register that college reading, writing and speaking demand. This helps explain why honor graduates can pass English subjects yet struggle to explain an idea orally or write a coherent paragraph in English.

A Multilingual Learner in a Shifting Policy Landscape

Most Filipino children grow up speaking one or more of the country’s many regional languages, learn Filipino as a national language, and meet English largely in school. English has been a medium of instruction since the American colonial period, and its role has long been tied to social mobility and inequality (Bernardo, 2004; Tupas, 2015). Language-in-education policy has changed repeatedly. The K to 12 law (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013) mandated mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) from Kindergarten to Grade 3. Implementation studies reported shortages of materials, trained teachers and standardized orthographies, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms (Metila et al., 2016). In October 2024, Republic Act No. 12027 lapsed into law, discontinuing the mother tongue as the main medium of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3 and reverting to Filipino and English, with regional languages as auxiliary media (RA 12027, 2024).

The evidence on what this means for learning is more nuanced than the public debate. A September 2026 PIDS policy note found that what matters is not whether a school switched its language of instruction but how closely that language matches learners’ home language. Better matching was associated with higher achievement in Mathematics, Filipino and English, and the authors describe mismatch as a “tax on

learning” (Abrigo et al., 2026). Learners who first meet academic content in a language they do not yet understand pay that tax repeatedly, and the cost accumulates in the same way as the Matthew effect described in Section 3.

Conversational Versus Academic Proficiency

Cummins’s (1979, 2008) distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) offers the clearest lens. BICS, the language of social interaction, is acquired relatively quickly and is supported by context, gesture and shared reference. CALP, the language of textbooks, lectures, definitions, argument and academic writing, is context-reduced and cognitively demanding, and it develops over years through sustained reading and structured instruction.

A learner can display good BICS in English (understanding media, chatting online, answering familiar classroom questions) while lacking CALP. School assessments that rely heavily on recognition items, memorization and teacher-familiar formats can award high grades to such learners. College tasks, which require summarizing unfamiliar texts, synthesizing sources, and defending a position orally or in writing, expose the absence of CALP immediately. This is a plausible mechanism for the practitioner’s observation that honor graduates “struggle to speak and write in English”: they may have been rewarded for BICS-level performance in a system that did not test CALP.

Writing: The Least Developed Skill

Writing deserves separate attention because it is where CALP is most visible. SEA-PLM 2019 found that only 1% of Filipino Grade 5 pupils could produce cohesive texts with detailed ideas and appropriate vocabulary (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2020). The PIDS review of SHS outcomes also flagged persistent problems with reading and writing competencies among SHS learners (Abrigo & Orbeta, 2023). International research shows that writing improves through explicit instruction in strategies, frequent extended writing, and feedback (Graham & Perin, 2007). Large classes and congested curricula, both documented in the Philippine system, work against all three.

Implication for Tertiary Education

At the tertiary level, English is the dominant medium of instruction in most degree programs and in licensure examinations. Under the revised general education curriculum adopted after K to 12 (CHED Memorandum Order No. 20, s. 2013), much foundational content was moved down to SHS on the assumption that entrants would arrive prepared. The literature reviewed suggests that assumption does not hold for a large share of entrants, particularly in SUCs that serve learners from public schools and disadvantaged regions.

Theme 4: Structural Causes and the Unguarded Transition to College

The fourth finding is that the gap is produced and sustained by system conditions, and that nothing at the SHS–college boundary is designed to detect it. Deficits therefore pass silently into higher education.

Conditions that limit learning time and quality

The literature identifies a cluster of mutually reinforcing causes (Table 4).

Table 4. *System conditions that limit learning time and quality*

Factor	Evidence	Source
Early-childhood disadvantage	Stunting affects 23.6% of children; ECE participation among 3–4-year-olds is about 34%	EDCOM 2 (2026)
Lost instructional time	Learners average about 191 actual class days; some regions lose up to 42 days to suspensions and activities	EDCOM 2 (2026)

Factor	Evidence	Source
Learning materials	Only 35 of 94 required textbook titles had been delivered by January 2025	EDCOM 2 (2025)
Teaching practice	Classroom observations show widespread weak practices; about 40% of Grade 5 teachers reported by students as sometimes or often absent	World Bank (2023)
Curriculum load	Congested curricula with many competencies crowd out sustained reading and writing	Abrigo & Orbeta (2023); EDCOM 2 (2026)
Language mismatch	Gap between home language and language of instruction lowers achievement	Abrigo et al. (2026)
Pandemic disruption	Prolonged school closures and modular distance learning deepened losses for the cohorts now entering college	World Bank (2022)

None of these factors is specific to reading, yet each reduces the volume of guided reading and writing that learners experience. In the terms of Section 3, they slow the accumulation of vocabulary and background knowledge, and so feed the Matthew effect.

Senior High School as a Bridge that Does Not Bear Weight

SHS was introduced to prepare learners for higher education, employment, skills development or entrepreneurship. In practice most graduates continue to college: labor force data from 2018 to 2020 showed that a little over 20% of SHS graduates entered the labor force while more than 70% pursued higher education (Orbeta & Potestad, 2025). SHS therefore functions mainly as a college-preparatory stage.

Yet the SHS curriculum assumes that learners arrive from Grade 10 as independent readers. When about seven in eight Grade 11 learners cannot read independently (Apacible, 2026), SHS subjects such as Reading and Writing Skills, Oral Communication and Research cannot do the remedial work that is needed. They are designed to extend literacy, not to build it. EDCOM 2's co-chair has argued that the problem will not be solved by adding subjects and competencies, and that industry has noted comprehension gaps among SHS graduates (DZRH News, n.d.). The evaluation evidence on SHS is mixed rather than wholly negative: SHS graduates earn more and are more likely to hold middle-skill jobs than junior high graduates, but quality problems, including in reading and writing, persist (Abrigo & Orbeta, 2023).

The Unguarded Boundary

At the point of transition, three conditions allow deficits to cross undetected.

First, there is no common, criterion-referenced literacy standard that links Grade 12 exit to college entry. The NAT for Grade 12 is a system-monitoring tool, not a certification, and its results are not used in admission decisions. Second, admission to many SUCs relies heavily on the SHS general average, honors and, in some institutions, locally developed tests whose validity is rarely reported. As Section 4 showed, the general average is the very indicator most affected by inflation. Third, the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (Republic Act No. 10931, 2017) widened access to free tuition in SUCs, an important equity gain that has also increased enrollment of first-generation and under-prepared students without a matching expansion of academic support.

The result is what this review calls an *unguarded transition*: the credential that crosses the boundary is the inflated grade, while the competence it is assumed to certify is never independently checked. College teachers then encounter the gap in their first weeks of class, as the author did, and often interpret it as an individual student deficiency rather than a predictable system outcome.

Consequences in Higher Education

The literature points to three consequences, though Philippine evidence on each is still thin. Under-prepared entrants face higher risk of failure and attrition; EDCOM 2 documented high tertiary dropout, especially in disadvantaged regions (EDCOM 2, 2025). Faculty adjust instruction downward, which can reproduce the same inflation at tertiary level. Finally, licensure and employment outcomes suffer when graduates lack the reading and English skills that professional examinations and workplaces require. These consequences are mainly inferred from basic-education data and international studies; direct Philippine tracer evidence linking SHS literacy to college outcomes is a priority gap, discussed in Section 8.

DISCUSSION

A Conceptual Model of the Credential–Competence Gap

Taken together, the four themes describe a single process rather than four separate problems. The review proposes a five-stage model of how a reading deficit becomes an honors graduate who cannot use academic English (Figure 1).

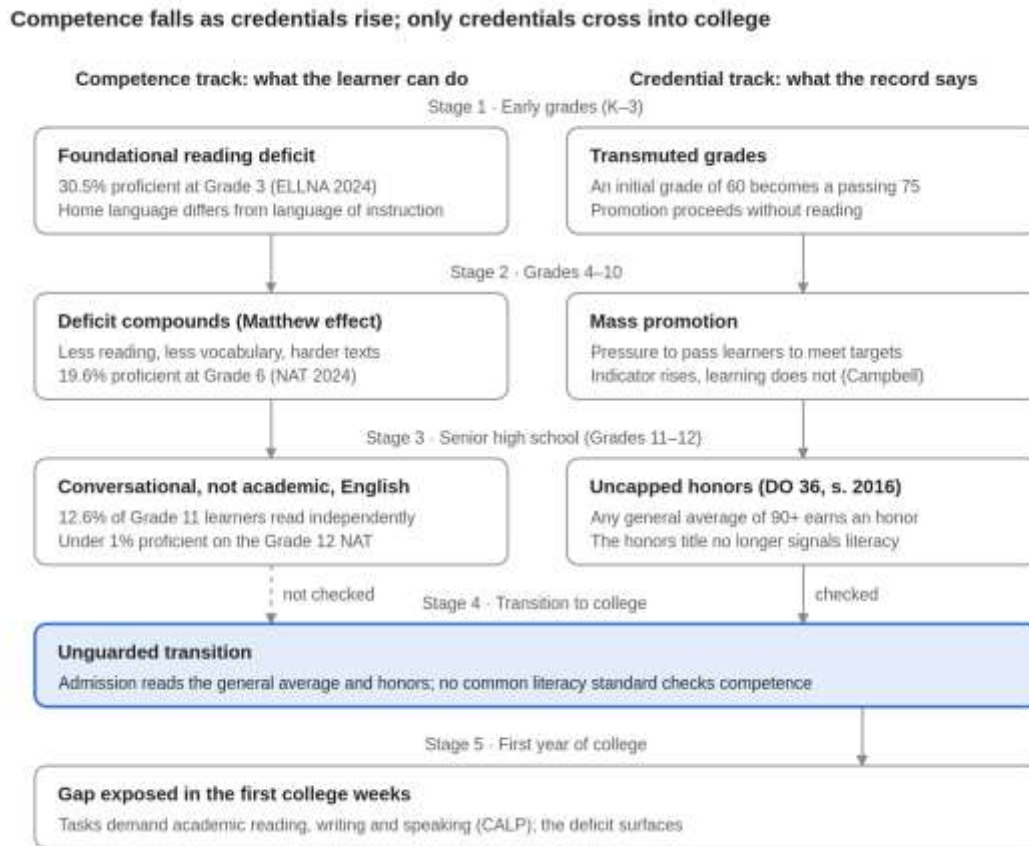


Figure 1. *The credential–competence gap model*

The two tracks separate across basic education; at the transition only the credential track is checked, so the deficit surfaces in college. Figures are from EDCOM 2 (2026) and Apacible (2026).

In the model, competence and credentials travel on two tracks. On the competence track, a foundational reading deficit in the early grades accumulates through the Matthew effect and through

language mismatch, so the learner falls further behind each year. On the credential track, transmutation, mass promotion and uncapped honors allow grades to rise regardless. Campbell's law explains why the credential track drifts upward: grades and promotion rates are used to judge schools and teachers, so pressure acts on the indicator. At the SHS–college boundary, only the credential is checked. The deficit is exposed only when college tasks demand cognitive academic language proficiency.

The model's central claim is that the gap is generated by the *separation* of the two tracks, not by either one alone. Low achievement with honest grades would be visible and could be remediated. High grades with genuine achievement would pose no problem. It is the combination of a growing deficit and a rising credential that produces the practitioner's surprise, and that delays intervention until it is most costly.

Relation to Existing Literature

The model extends prior work in three ways. Much Philippine research on grade inflation treats it as a university phenomenon centered on Latin honors; this review locates its origin in basic-education grading rules and shows how it interacts with literacy. International studies of high school grade inflation (Gershenson, 2018; Sanchez & Moore, 2022) focus on predictive validity for college success; the Philippine case adds a language dimension, because the competence being masked is largely academic English. Finally, the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986) and the BICS–CALP distinction (Cummins, 2008) are usually applied to individual learners; here they are used to explain a system-level trajectory visible in national data.

Alternative Explanations

Three alternative readings deserve consideration. First, the measured decline may be partly an artefact of a stringent 75% proficiency cut-off and of NAT designs that test broad competencies (The POST, 2026). This would soften the percentages but cannot account for the Grade 11 independent-reading result or the international data. Second, rising honors may partly reflect genuine improvement or the extra two years of SHS, a view advanced in public debate about Latin honors. The national proficiency data make widespread genuine improvement unlikely at basic-education level, but the hypothesis should be tested rather than dismissed. Third, college teachers' perceptions may be shaped by salient cases. This is why the review does not rely on practitioner observation and treats the author's experience only as the origin of the question.

Implications

For policy, the model implies that remediation alone will not close the gap while the credential track keeps drifting. EDCOM 2's recommendations to end mass promotion, phase out transmutation and fully implement the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program address both tracks and are consistent with this analysis (EDCOM 2, 2026). For higher education, it implies that SUCs should not treat the SHS general average or honors as sufficient evidence of readiness. Independent diagnostic assessment of reading and academic English at entry, followed by credit-bearing support, would place a check where the model shows none exists. For teacher education, it implies that pre-service programs for both SHS and tertiary teachers need explicit preparation in teaching disciplinary reading and academic writing, not only content knowledge (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Recommendations

The recommendations follow the model's two tracks and its unguarded boundary (Table 5).

Table 5. *Recommendations by level and track addressed*

Level	Recommendation	Track addressed
DepEd (basic education)	Phase out raw-score transmutation and mass promotion, as EDCOM 2 recommends; report reading levels (e.g., Phil-IRI or CRLA band) alongside grades on report cards	Credential
DepEd (basic education)	Make sustained, extended reading and writing a protected part of every SHS subject rather than of language subjects alone	Competence
DepEd and CHED jointly	Develop a common, criterion-referenced Grade 12 exit statement of reading and academic-English proficiency that SUCs can use at entry	Boundary
SUCs and HEIs	Administer validated diagnostic reading and academic-English assessments at entry; do not rely on general average or honors alone	Boundary
SUCs and HEIs	Offer credit-bearing academic literacy support and writing centres in the first year, linked to discipline courses	Competence
Teacher education institutions	Train pre-service and in-service teachers in disciplinary literacy and in grading against explicit standards	Both
Award policy	Review DepEd Order No. 36, s. 2016 so that academic honors require evidence of proficiency on an external measure, not only a general average	Credential

Limitations

Four limitations qualify the conclusions. First, as a narrative review, the study did not pool effect sizes, and the selection and weighting of sources involved interpretive judgement despite the SANRA-guided procedure. Second, several of the most recent national figures (2025–2026) were available mainly through official briefings and press reports of the EDCOM 2 final report and DepEd releases. They were traced to the originating agencies where possible, but some numbers differ across releases (for example, Grade 10 and Grade 12 NAT proficiency) and are reported as ranges. Third, the review found very little peer-reviewed Philippine research that follows the same learners from SHS into college, so claims about tertiary consequences are partly inferential. Fourth, the author's positionality as a former SHS and current state college teacher shaped the framing of the questions; this was declared and mitigated by excluding practitioner observation from the evidence base.

Agenda for Future Research

1. Longitudinal tracer studies linking learners' Grade 10–12 reading levels, SHS general average and honors status to first-year college performance and retention in SUCs.
2. Validity studies of SHS general averages and honors as predictors of college outcomes, comparable to the US work on grade inflation and test-score discrepancy.
3. Mixed-methods studies of how SHS teachers experience grading and promotion pressure, examining Campbell's law in Philippine schools.
4. Evaluations of entry diagnostics and first-year academic literacy programs in SUCs, using comparison groups.
5. Studies of English CALP development in multilingual Filipino learners after RA 12027, building on the PIDS language-matching evidence.

CONCLUSION

The paradox that prompted this review, honor graduates who cannot read or write well in English, is not an anomaly. It is the expected output of a system in which reading deficits begin early and compound, academic English is under-developed relative to conversational English, and grading, promotion and award rules allow credentials to rise independently of competence. At the boundary between senior high school and college, only the credential is checked.

Closing the gap therefore requires action on both tracks at once: rebuilding foundational and academic literacy, and restoring the meaning of grades and honors. It also requires a new check at the point of transition, so that higher education institutions meet entrants as they are rather than as their records describe them. Until then, college teachers will continue to discover, one first-year class at a time, what the system's own data have already shown.

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