

**The Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program
on the Discourse of Dialectical Hegemony**

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ABSTRACT

This paper deconstructs the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program (Republic Act No. 12028) through the lens of dialectical hegemony. It posits that ARAL is a strategic apparatus. It actively manages the core contradiction in Philippine education. This is the tension between the emancipatory potential of critical pedagogy and the instrumental demands of neoliberal performativity. The government frames ARAL as an equitable response, aligning it with a necessary "economic development mantra." It secures crucial public consent. Yet, we cannot take away the fact that the state struggles economically and urgently need a functional workforce. The focus on "recovery" and "deficit" is a pejorative discursive strategy. It diverts attention from chronic structural flaws. It places the failure onto the student or the pandemic. Analysis reveals a structural subordination. While the program rhetorically commits to developing "critical and analytical thinking skills," its operational focus is rigidly on the measurable mastery of Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs) in reading and math. This prioritization functionally reduces critique to a standardized, testable skill. It ensures the rapid production of minimum-level human capital necessary for the global labor market. The state's maneuver, strategically containing uncertainty through bureaucratic control, maintains the system's stability. The ARAL Program is not a revolution against inequity. It is a managed retreat. It is a necessary fix that structurally reaffirms existing economic and class divisions. The philosophical lens exposes political and economic function. It challenges the program's perceived nobility.

Keywords: ARAL program, Dialectical hegemony, Department of Education, Republic Act No. 12028

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INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Department of Education's (DepEd) Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program, formalized under Republic Act (RA) 12028, represents a significant policy intervention designed to mitigate profound learning gaps exacerbated by recent disruptions like the pandemic, aiming to stabilize the basic education system and ensure learners achieve mastery of essential competencies (DepEd Order No. 018 s. 2025). The legislative rhetoric surrounding the ARAL Act emphasizes goals of equity and national development, with political figures heralding it as a "landmark piece of legislation" intended to ensure that struggling students in both public and private schools are "not be left behind." This framing, consistent with the current administration's "economic development mantra" of providing every Filipino the opportunity to improve their lives and "catch up with the rest of our population," transforms the educational intervention from a mere pedagogical fix into a core strategy for national economic upliftment (House of Representatives, 2024, October). However, the program is defined by a problematic dual mandate: its immediate, operational objective is remediation and recovery, focusing on covering essential learning competencies (ELCs) in reading and mathematics for Grades 1 to 10, and science for Grades 3 to 10, while for Kindergarten, the focus is foundational literacy and numeracy. Concurrently, the policy asserts a high-level, aspirational goal to develop learners' critical and analytical thinking skills and 21st-century skills (Implementing Rules and Regulations [IRR-RA 12028], 2025). This juxtaposition—the measurable, instrumental demand for foundational skill mastery set against the expansive, disruptive goal of critical inquiry—establishes the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the program.

This report posits that the ARAL Program functions as an effective apparatus of dialectical hegemony by strategically articulating and perpetually containing the inherent contradiction between the emancipatory potential of critical pedagogy (the Antithesis) and the instrumental demands of neoliberal educational performativity (the Thesis). By continuously managing this inherent tension without resolving it, the state successfully reproduces the minimum necessary labor competencies while simultaneously securing the consent of subordinate classes through the legitimizing ideology of individual academic recovery and the promise of upward mobility. The explicit linkage between academic recovery and the "economic development mantra" suggests that ARAL's function transcends purely pedagogical aims, operating fundamentally as a human capital recalibration policy. Its objective is to restore students to a minimal level of functionality, defined by measurable essential learning competencies (ELCs), which is necessary to maintain the country's comparative advantage in supplying cost-effective labor to the global market, thereby reinforcing the established pattern of neoliberal restructuring evident in Philippine education (Sannadan, & Gas-ib, 2021). Furthermore, while the policy articulates the goal of fostering critical thinking, the operational reality of ARAL, within a context defined by scarce resources, limited time, and substantial teacher workload (Navarron, 2022), structurally subordinates these critical, analytical goals to the quantifiable, measurable competencies needed for rapid remediation. This results in the functional devaluation of authentic critical thinking, reducing it from a genuine process of philosophical inquiry or transformative potential to merely a functional, testable skill required for comprehension within a standardized framework.

To understand the operation of the ARAL Program, it is necessary to first anchor the analysis in Antonio Gramsci's seminal work on cultural hegemony, which serves as the foundation for this critique. Cultural hegemony is defined in Marxist philosophy as the dominance exerted by the ruling class over a culturally diverse society, achieved by shaping the society's core beliefs, values, explanations, and mores (Adamson, 1980). This process ensures that the ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm, often misrepresenting the social, political, and economic status quo as natural and inevitable, thereby benefiting only the ruling class while persuading subordinates that it benefits everyone (Adamson, 1980; Femia, 1982). Crucially, Gramsci argued that ruling groups do not maintain control merely through direct coercion (domination), but by actively seeking to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order (Malyshko, 2024). In parliamentary regimes, control is primarily maintained through this hegemony, even while the threat of state-sanctioned force remains implicit, by giving domination an aura of moral authority through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols. In education, this means schooling serves as a primary institutional agent of social control and reproduction, tasked with disciplining young minds and bodies to align with the "realities and rationalities of global capitalism" (Bates, 2021).

The analysis is further deepened by considering the philosophical centrality of contradiction. The concept of dialectical hegemony moves beyond a static view of cultural control by incorporating the transformative power of internal contradiction. Authentic dialectical thought, drawing on thinkers like Hegel, Marx, Adorno, and Marcuse, rejects the simplistic thesis-antithesis-synthesis model (Dubois et al., 2009). Instead, it sees contradiction not as a problem to be resolved, but as the fundamental driving force of both thought and reality itself—the engine of genuine understanding and transformative action. This requires accepting that development—whether biological or social—is chiefly propelled by internal rather than external causes (Mao Tse-tung, 1937). When applied to social structures, this principle demands that the critique locate the struggle and potential for change within the ARAL policy itself, examining the internal tensions that give the program its specific form and momentum.

Operationalizing this, Dialectical Hegemony (DH) is defined as the active and ongoing communicative struggle characterized by the "enactment of contradictory definitions" within a domain (Norton & Sadler, 2006). It views hegemony not as a fixed ideological imposition but as a dynamic process of "constant tension of control and resistance." DH flourishes in moments where fundamental concepts are subject to opposing definitions that are simultaneously "interdependent yet oppositional," generating significant tension and "abundant uncertainty" (Ballar-Reisch et al., 2017). In policy, the hegemonic maneuver is not to eliminate this tension but to manage it, often by strategically unifying collective action, such as simplifying complex problems or externalizing the perceived threat—for instance, by framing policy failure as an issue of "learning loss" rather than structural inequity. The structural configuration of the ARAL Program embodies this process of enacted dialectics. Whereas a traditional Gramscian analysis might focus on why citizens consent to an instrumental education system, DH focuses on how the state maintains the political and administrative momentum of the policy despite the inherent, glaring contradictions voiced by critics and teachers. The policy must sustain the tension between its emancipatory rhetoric (critical thinking) and its operational security (quantifiable, remedial outputs), a structural tension that necessitates continuous administrative and discursive management by the DepEd (IRR-RA 12028).

A key maneuver in this management is the institutionalization of uncertainty regarding the radical components of the program. The theoretical framework suggests that contradictory definitions breed "abundant uncertainty" (Norton & Sadler, 2006), and the DepEd manages this by focusing its immediate administrative efforts on measurable remediation outcomes—systematized tutorial sessions, assessment schemes, and resource development—while deferring the execution of the highly subjective goal of "critical thinking" to vague, forthcoming "separate guidelines." This structural ambiguity and delayed articulation functionally dilute the immediate operational impact of the critical component, effectively neutralizing the antithesis within the daily implementation of the policy.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a philosophical and interpretive research design grounded in dialectical analysis to examine the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program as an apparatus of ideological and structural power. Rather than relying on empirical field data, the study focuses on the systematic deconstruction of the program's official policy texts, including Republic Act No. 12028 and its Implementing Rules and Regulations, recognizing that the core phenomenon under investigation—the operation of dialectical hegemony within ARAL—manifests at the level of discourse, policy framing, and institutional intent. The choice of a qualitative, critical-interpretive design is deliberate, as conventional quantitative approaches would only capture the program's observable and measurable outputs, particularly Essential Learning Competency (ELC) mastery, and would be insufficient for interrogating the deeper structural subordination of emancipatory goals, such as critical and analytical thinking, to the performative demands of neoliberal education systems.

In analyzing these documents, the study draws on the works of Gramsci, Marx, and contemporary scholars on hegemony, performativity, and educational restructuring. This philosophical grounding allows the research to look beyond the surface rhetoric of academic recovery and uncover how policy language, ideological framing, and administrative directives converge to reproduce dominant social, political, and economic arrangements. Interpretive analysis is essential in this process, as it provides the capacity to reveal the latent meanings, assumptions, and contradictions embedded within policy texts—elements that quantitative metrics cannot capture. Following Levich (1963) and Smith et al. (2009), the research situates meaning-making at the forefront of policy critique, acknowledging that educational programs are not neutral interventions but culturally and politically constructed instruments.

The study does not involve a human population or sampling procedure, as its corpus consists exclusively of official government documents, legislative texts, and publicly accessible administrative issuances related to the ARAL Program. These sources constitute the research locale in the discursive sense: the institutional and ideological space in which the ARAL policy is produced, enacted, and legitimized. Because the study relies solely on publicly available documents, no direct ethical risks concerning human participants arise. Nevertheless, the research maintains ethical rigor by ensuring accurate representation of all cited materials, avoiding misinterpretation of policy statements, and critically engaging with sources without distorting their intent. Proper attribution and responsible use of government documents uphold the standards of academic integrity and transparency.

Data gathering was carried out through document retrieval from official Department of Education platforms, legislative archives, and published memoranda at the national and division

levels. This process included collecting related scholarly literature that contextualizes neoliberal restructuring, dependency, human capital theory, and critical pedagogy to strengthen the interpretive framework. Once gathered, the documents were examined through iterative close reading, analytic memoing, and thematic coding that focused on identifying contradictions, ideological maneuvers, and patterns of discursive control. These coded themes were then synthesized to reveal the “dialectical knot” at the heart of ARAL—the tension between the program’s aspirational rhetoric and its instrumental, measurable, and market-oriented operational structure.

Data analysis followed a dialectical process, moving between textual details and broader theoretical constructs to uncover how the ARAL Program constructs, sustains, and manages contradictory definitions of learning, equity, and critical thinking. This approach allowed the researcher to trace the interplay between policy intentions and hegemonic imperatives, highlighting how the state strategically contains transformative possibilities while amplifying those aligned with neoliberal performativity. The hermeneutic engagement with the texts thus enabled the study to expose the ideological functions masked within technical language and administrative guidelines.

In sum, this methodology, anchored in philosophical critique and interpretive policy analysis, provides a rigorous framework for investigating how ARAL operates as an instrument of dialectical hegemony. Through its focus on meaning, contradiction, and ideological structure, the study illuminates the deep political and economic functions of the program—functions that would remain obscured if the analysis were confined to empirical performance indicators alone.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing from the document-based methodology employed in this study, which analyzed the ARAL Act (Republic Act 12028), its Implementing Rules and Regulations, and related Department of Education issuances, the results reflect the ideological, structural, and pedagogical patterns embedded within the program. Although the study did not involve human participants, the qualitative interpretive process provided substantive data that illuminated how ARAL’s design, coverage, and operational mechanisms function within a larger neoliberal and hegemonic framework. The themes emerging from the documents reveal a consolidated pattern of highly centralized governance, prioritized foundational skill remediation, and strategic policy framing that together shape the program’s broader social and economic implications.

Neoliberal imperatives and pedagogical mandates of the ARAL Program

The findings show that the ARAL Act explicitly mandates the coverage of Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs) aligned with the K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum, reflecting a strong remedial orientation. Reading and mathematics for Grades 1 to 10 and science for Grades 3 to 10 are emphasized as core priority areas. These subjects are consistently positioned as crucial for developing analytical and critical thinking skills, yet their operational treatment remains heavily grounded in measurable performance indicators. The analysis of the IRR and DepEd orders further reveals that the program’s implementation requires coordination across multiple central

bureaus, including the Bureau of Learning Delivery (BLD), Bureau of Education Assessment (BEA), and the National Educators' Academy of the Philippines (NEAP). These divisions collectively issue guidelines for tutorial sessions, intervention plans, assessment procedures, and the hiring and training of tutors, reflecting an intricate bureaucratic system designed to maintain uniformity and control throughout the execution of the program. This complexity reinforces centralized authority over pedagogical processes and ensures tight oversight over all stages of implementation.

Contextualizing ARAL within neoliberal educational restructuring

The results also show that ARAL's structure aligns with a broader pattern of neoliberal educational reform in the Philippines, echoing the earlier trajectory of the K to 12 Program. The examined documents and scholarly literature illustrate how education continues to be framed as a mechanism for national economic interest, with the state positioning human capital investment as a pragmatic response to global economic pressures. This alignment reinforces the idea that academic reforms serve to produce a more competitive, workforce-ready population. The findings coincide with critiques that such systems perpetuate social reproduction, as educational outcomes are still shaped by disparities in social and financial capital, systematically privileging higher socioeconomic classes. Despite aspirations for equity, the structure of ARAL—as indicated by its focus on rapid remediation—operates within these entrenched inequalities, ultimately reproducing rather than disrupting class divisions. Dependency Theory further contextualizes these dynamics, revealing that rapid re-skilling in foundational areas supports the continued supply of affordable labor to industrialized countries. The policy rhetoric promoting “critical thinking” thus functions as an ideological veil, providing moral legitimacy while obscuring the program's deeper economic function in sustaining long-term dependency.

The contradiction between rhetoric and prioritization

The analysis reveals a central contradiction within ARAL's stated objectives. While the policy documents highlight the development of critical, analytical, and 21st-century skills, the operational outcomes focus almost exclusively on the mastery of ELCs. This juxtaposition demonstrates a clear tension between the program's remedial, instrumental goals and its aspirational, emancipatory claims. The findings show that the success of ARAL is defined by quantifiable performance metrics, which reinforces neoliberal performativity and positions ELC mastery as the minimum qualification for labor market participation. The rigid focus on these measurable standards ensures that ARAL remains instrumental to capital reproduction, as argued by Adarlo and Jackson (2017). This contradiction becomes further visible in how the policy language frames the program through the “economic development mantra,” emphasizing national upliftment while simultaneously presenting remediation as a moral imperative to ensure that “no student is left behind.”

The enactment of the dialectic: contradictory definitions in ARAL

The results of the interpretive analysis show that the ARAL Program embodies an ongoing dialectical tension managed by the Department of Education. The first contradiction centers on criticality versus performativity. Philippine education has long been shaped by neoliberal

performativity, where standardized metrics serve as the primary indicators of academic success. ARAL intensifies this paradigm by measuring “critical thinking” through highly structured ELC-based assessments, thereby reducing philosophical or transformative inquiry into a functional cognitive skill aligned with standardized targets. The analysis shows that by embedding critical thinking within rigid performative structures, the DepEd effectively neutralizes its disruptive potential. This instrumentalization of critique secures the stability of the system by reconfiguring a potentially emancipatory skill into a controlled, measurable competency.

The second contradiction involves equity rhetoric versus structural reproduction. Policy narratives emphasize ARAL as an equitable intervention designed to help all Filipino learners “catch up,” but the analysis reveals that the intervention primarily re-qualifies the most vulnerable segments of the population for low-wage labor markets. This process stabilizes the labor supply while maintaining the socioeconomic conditions that marginalize learners in the first place. Aspirational language about critical thinking and empowerment acts as a semantic buffer that legitimizes the intervention while masking the intensification of neoliberal control. Teacher responses documented in administrative issuances further highlight how excessive workloads—such as the integration of ARAL into already burdened teacher schedules—serve as mechanisms of structural domination that limit educators’ ability to resist, innovate, or introduce genuine critical pedagogy.

Mechanisms of hegemonic articulation and control

The findings also illustrate how ARAL operates through sophisticated discursive strategies that secure public consent. Political leaders frame learning loss as a moral and national crisis, thereby transforming ARAL into an unquestionable necessity. This framing diverts attention from chronic systemic issues such as inadequate funding, curriculum overload, and structural inequity. The analysis also identifies interconnections between ARAL and other DepEd initiatives, such as the controversial “Catch-Up Friday” and the semantic alteration of “Marcos dictatorship” to “diktadura” in the Grade 6 Araling Panlipunan curriculum. These actions reveal a broader pattern of ideological management that spans both competency-based and historical content, creating a unified apparatus for shaping political and economic consciousness.

The institutional complexity required for ARAL’s implementation—particularly through standardization, multi-layered administrative protocols, and tutor training—further consolidates central control. Tutors and facilitators, functioning as agents of the state, operate within tightly prescribed guidelines, leaving little room for autonomy or critical engagement. Combined with the significant administrative burden placed on teachers, this structure effectively suppresses counter-hegemonic practices and limits democratic participation within the educational system. Ultimately, the results show that ARAL’s dialectical contradictions are not resolved but strategically managed to maintain systemic stability, ensuring that the program fulfills its role as an apparatus of dialectical hegemony.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program operates as a deliberate apparatus of dialectical hegemony, strategically managing the tension between its emancipatory rhetoric and its instrumental, neoliberal functions. Rather than resolving the contradiction between critical pedagogy and performativity, the program harnesses this tension to stabilize the prevailing educational and economic order. The analysis reveals that ARAL secures broad public consent and moral legitimacy through the language of academic recovery, learner upliftment, and critical development, yet its structural design remains expressly optimized for the rapid, standardized production of foundational human capital. By centering Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs) in reading, mathematics, and science, and emphasizing measurable remediation over transformative inquiry, the program reinstates the minimum proficiency levels required to sustain the country's position within the global labor market. This configuration reflects Gramsci's assertion that consent and domination are coexistent and mutually reinforcing elements of state power, as the DepEd's policy framework simultaneously promises empowerment while reinforcing the structural constraints that limit genuine educational liberation.

Moreover, the analysis shows that ARAL's implementation is deeply embedded within a broader pattern of neoliberal restructuring in Philippine education. The program's reliance on quantifiable performance metrics, centralized oversight by multiple DepEd bureaus, and the prioritization of remedial over critical competencies reveal how education is mobilized as an instrument of national economic interest rather than a space for emancipatory growth. While framed as an equitable intervention designed to support struggling learners, the program ultimately functions to reproduce existing class divisions by re-qualifying the most vulnerable populations for low-wage global labor markets. The rhetoric of "no student left behind" thus masks the structural reality that academic success remains strongly influenced by disparities in financial, cultural, and social capital. In this regard, ARAL provides a ladder for learners to "catch up," but does not interrogate why such a ladder is necessary, nor does it challenge the systemic inequities that produced the educational gap in the first place. As such, the program represents not a transformative revolution in public education, but a managed retreat—a necessary corrective built upon institutional failure rather than a substantive reimagining of the system that allowed learning loss to proliferate.

While the ARAL Program achieves functional stability by containing the dialectical contradiction between its remedial and aspirational components, the findings also highlight the continued possibility of emancipatory praxis within the educational landscape. Recognizing that genuine transformation requires more than technical remediation, the study underscores the need for educators to consciously redefine critical thinking beyond its narrow operationalization as a standardized analytical skill. By using foundational reading and mathematical competencies as entry points for dialogue about structural inequities and the socio-political forces shaping educational outcomes, teachers can reclaim criticality as a space for questioning, reflection, and transformation. Such practices resist the reduction of education to quantifiable metrics and foreground the importance of qualitative intellectual inquiry, shifting the focus from minimum proficiency to deeper forms of understanding.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the necessity of collective democratic participation to counterbalance the centralization of ideological control within DepEd policies. Parents, teachers, and communities must move beyond individualized notions of academic success and instead

engage collaboratively in shaping educational priorities. Organizing against top-down mandates, resisting excessive administrative burdens, and advocating for structural reforms open avenues for disrupting hegemonic control and fostering more equitable, participatory forms of educational governance. These opportunities for counter-hegemonic action reveal that, despite its structural limitations, the ARAL Program does not entirely foreclose the pursuit of an emancipatory educational vision.

In summary, while ARAL serves as a necessary intervention in addressing learning loss, its design and implementation reveal its deeper function as a mechanism for sustaining neoliberal interests, reproducing social hierarchies, and stabilizing systemic inequities. The program fills an urgent gap and restores basic competencies, but it does not interrogate the social, political, and economic conditions that produced these gaps. Its success in restoring functionality masks its inability to transform the structures that repeatedly disadvantage learners. Nevertheless, opportunities for emancipatory praxis remain possible through deliberate, critical engagement by educators, communities, and stakeholders who choose to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more just and transformative educational future.

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