

Addressing reading gaps through ARAL Program implementation

Jascille Mae U. Briones

Cebu Technological University-Main Campus
J. Cuenco Ave, Cor R. Palma Street, Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines
Email: henjaynesu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program, a DepEd initiative to address pandemic-related learning loss, provides targeted literacy and numeracy interventions for struggling learners. In response to post-pandemic learning loss and persistent foundational literacy gaps, this study evaluated the implementation and effectiveness of the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program among Grade 3 non-readers in Pangamihan and Old Bucao Elementary Schools, Toledo City, Cebu. Using a convergent parallel mixed-method design, the research involved 42 learners and 35 teacher-tutors, combining quantitative reading assessments with qualitative data from structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. The quasi-experimental component measured learners' reading proficiency before and after program participation, revealing marked improvements in decoding, phonemic awareness, and reading confidence, while fluency and comprehension remained areas for further support. Qualitative findings highlighted strong teacher agreement on ARAL's impact, alongside challenges such as limited training, instructional resources, and monitoring tools. Grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Adaptive Learning Theory, and aligned with DepEd Order No. 018, s. In 2025, the study proposed a school-based enhancement plan to strengthen ARAL delivery in rural contexts. These findings contribute to DepEd's broader learning recovery efforts by offering evidence-based recommendations for improving early-grade reading interventions in disadvantaged communities.

Keywords: ARAL Program implementation, reading proficiency, Grade 3 Non-Readers, phonemic awareness, decoding, reading confidence, fluency, comprehension, teacher perceptions, instructional barriers, monitoring and evaluation, mixed-method research design, quasi-experimental methodology, focus group discussion, enhancement plan, Cebu Technological University

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational skill that underpins all academic learning, enabling students to access, process, and engage with content across various subjects and making it essential for educational success (Hudson et al., 2021). According to UNESCO, reading literacy is the ability to understand, use, and reflect on written texts to achieve goals, develop knowledge, and participate in society. In the Philippine context, functional literacy goes beyond decoding to encompass comprehension and the practical application of reading skills in real-life situations. Despite its critical importance, many Filipino learners continue to struggle with basic literacy, particularly in reading fluency and comprehension. The 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reported a basic literacy rate of 93.1%, yet highlighted persistent gaps in functional literacy among school-aged children (Department of Education, 2025).

Recent trends reveal a growing concern over the number of non-readers and frustrated readers in public elementary schools. In response, the Department of Education (DepEd) strengthened its literacy programs, most notably the Hamon: Bawat Bata Bumabasa (3Bs Initiative) and the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP). The 3Bs Initiative, launched through DepEd Memorandum No. 173, s. 2019, mobilizes schools and communities to ensure that every child can read by the end of Grade 3. ECARP, institutionalized through DepEd Order No. 50, s. 2012, provides a structured framework for reading instruction and assessment, including the use of the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) to identify and support struggling readers. These programs are further reinforced by the Basic Education Development Plan (BEDP) 2030, adopted through DepEd Order No. 024, s. 2022, which prioritizes foundational learning skills and aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education.

To further address learning gaps, particularly in disadvantaged communities, the government enacted Republic Act No. 12028, also known as the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program Act. This legislation mandates the establishment of a free and effective national learning intervention program focused on foundational skills in reading, mathematics, and science. The Act was operationalized through DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2025, which provides implementing guidelines for short-term, focused academic support for learners performing below minimum proficiency levels. Additionally, DepEd Memorandum No. 064, s. 2025 emphasizes the need for localized implementation, particularly in Key Stages 1 to 3, and highlights the use of diagnostic tools such as the Phil-IRI and Individualized Reading Assessments (IRA) to guide remediation.

The implementation of the ARAL Program is grounded in a robust framework of interconnected learning theories that guide its design, delivery, and evaluation. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) provides the foundation for scaffolded instruction, ensuring that learners receive targeted support just beyond their current independent capacity. This is complemented by Scaffolding and Reciprocal Teaching, which facilitate peer-supported comprehension development, and Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989), in which teachers model effective reading strategies and gradually transfer responsibility to learners. Adaptive Learning Theory (Klinkenberg, Straatemeier, & van der Maas, 2011) supports ARAL's use of diagnostic assessments and responsive teaching, enabling the customization of interventions to match individual reading levels. Constructivist Learning Theory (Bruner, 1966) reinforces the program's emphasis on connecting reading tasks to learners' real-life experiences, while Differentiated Instruction Theory (Tomlinson, 2014) promotes flexible teaching methods suited to diverse learner readiness levels. Metacognitive Theory (Flavell, 1979) further supports self-monitoring and reflective learning through the integration of formative and summative assessment practices. These theoretical foundations

are aligned with DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2025, DepEd Order No. 013, s. 2023 on national learning recovery, DepEd Order No. 8, s. 2015 and DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017 on assessment and teacher standards, and Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, ensuring that the ARAL intervention is both pedagogically sound and legally grounded.

Statement of the problem

This research assessed the ARAL Program implementation among Grade 3 teachers in the North District, Cluster II of Toledo City, Cebu for the School Year 2025-2026 as a basis for an enhancement plan for strengthening early-grade reading instruction. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the respondents in terms of age and gender, highest educational attainment, number of years in teaching, and related seminars and trainings attended?
2. As perceived by the respondents, what is the level of implementation of the ARAL Program in the areas of learners' participation, intervention quality and delivery, program effectiveness and impact, and monitoring and evaluation?
3. What is the reading proficiency level of Grade 3 learners during the middle of the School Year in the ARAL Program?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the reading proficiency level of Grade 3 learners and the level of ARAL Program implementation during the middle of the School Year?
5. What issues and barriers are encountered by teachers during the implementation of the ARAL Program?
6. Based on the findings, what enhancement plan may be proposed for strengthening early-grade reading instruction?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate the effectiveness of the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program in improving reading skills among Grade 3 non-readers at Pangamihan and Old Bucao Elementary Schools in Toledo City, Cebu. The quantitative component employed a quasi-experimental design featuring a pre-test and post-test control group structure, a methodology particularly appropriate for real-world classroom settings where full randomization is not feasible. Learners who participated in the ARAL Program were compared with those who did not, enabling the researcher to measure reading improvements attributable to the intervention. The statistical method used was the paired sample t-test, which is appropriate for comparing mean scores before and after an intervention within the same group.

The study was conducted in two public elementary schools in Toledo City, Cebu, namely Pangamihan Elementary School and its mother school, Old Bucao Elementary School. Both institutions are situated in rural, mountainous areas approximately 40 to 70 kilometers from the city proper, serving communities where farming and fishing constitute the primary sources of livelihood. This geographic and socio-economic context was central to the study's aim of evaluating ARAL's effectiveness in disadvantaged rural settings.

The respondents comprised 35 elementary school teachers from both schools who were actively involved in ARAL Program delivery. These teachers participated by answering a structured survey questionnaire, and their responses provided valuable insights into their

experiences, challenges, and instructional strategies. The study employed purposive sampling, as respondents were intentionally selected based on their direct and specific involvement as ARAL implementers. This approach strengthened the reliability of the findings and ensured that insights were balanced across the two schools' distinct geographic and socio-economic conditions.

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising six parts designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The first part gathered the demographic profile of teacher-respondents, including age, gender, highest educational attainment, teaching experience, and trainings attended, information used to explore whether these characteristics relate to ARAL implementation practices. The second part assessed teachers' perceptions of program implementation across four domains: learner participation, intervention quality and delivery, program effectiveness and impact, and monitoring and evaluation. The third part evaluated learners' reading performance during the middle quarter across skills such as letter recognition, fluency, comprehension, and confidence. The fourth part measured how learners perceived their own reading abilities before and after ARAL participation, capturing improvements across reading sub-skills. The fifth part incorporated focus group discussions examining implementation challenges and barriers encountered by teachers, yielding in-depth contextual insights. The sixth part gathered teachers' suggestions for program improvement, including training needs, instructional support, parental involvement strategies, and resource requirements.

Data gathering commenced following the approval of school heads from both institutions. Letters of consent were subsequently sent to all teacher-respondents to ensure voluntary participation. Reading assessments were administered to identified Grade 3 non-readers to measure changes in reading skills before and after ARAL participation. Focus group discussions with teachers were conducted to validate the quantitative data and gather qualitative insights regarding implementation challenges. All collected data were organized, tallied, and analyzed using appropriate statistical methods.

Data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive tools including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize respondent profiles and implementation ratings. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (r) was applied to determine the relationship between teacher competence and learner reading performance. Qualitative data from focus group discussions were analyzed through thematic analysis, allowing the researcher to identify recurring patterns and contextual insights. The integrated analysis of quantitative and qualitative findings supported the formulation of a responsive, school-based enhancement plan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age and gender, highest educational attainment, number of years in teaching, related seminars and trainings attended, and parental style

Out of 35 participants, 71.4% identified as female and 28.6% as male, revealing a notable gender gap. This uneven ratio reflects broader national trends in the Philippine education sector, where women dominate the teaching workforce. Such demographic patterns are shaped by cultural expectations that position women as primary nurturers and educators, especially in caregiving roles.

The data also revealed that the most represented group among respondents is females aged 26–30, making up 34.3% of the total sample. This is followed by females aged 31–35 (22.9%), males aged 26–30 (14.3%), and females aged 36–40 (8.6%). The next largest group

is males aged 31–35 (11.4%), while males aged 36–40 (2.9%) and females aged 41–45 (5.7%) show minimal representation. Notably, there are no male respondents in the 41–45 age bracket. The majority, 60% (21 individuals), are currently pursuing a master’s degree, indicating strong engagement in professional development. Meanwhile, 34.3% (12 individuals) have completed a bachelor’s degree, and only 5.7% (2 individuals) have fully completed a master’s degree. This distribution suggests that most participants are in transition toward higher academic qualifications, with a solid base of undergraduate education and a small group already holding advanced degrees.

A majority, 57.1% (20 individuals), have 1 to 5 years of teaching experience, indicating a relatively young cohort of educators. Another 40% (14 individuals) fall within the 8 to 10 years bracket, representing mid-career professionals. Only 2.9% (1 individual) have served for more than 21 years. The average years in service is 5.57, with a standard deviation of 3.91, suggesting a workforce that is largely early in their careers but with some variation in experience levels.

The largest group of respondents are those with 1 to 5 years of service (57.1%), followed by those with 8 to 10 years (40%), and lastly, those with over 21 years (2.9%). This distribution highlights a teaching force that is predominantly composed of novice educators, with a substantial portion of mid-career professionals and a very small number of veterans. The data suggests that while the majority are still building their classroom experience, there is a meaningful presence of more seasoned teachers who can offer mentorship and institutional insight. According to the Department of Education’s Implementing Rules and Regulations of RA 12028, the success of ARAL hinges on educators’ capacity to provide targeted support in reading and numeracy—skills that are shaped by their years of service and access to ongoing professional development (Magulod, 2021).

The most attended seminar was Classroom Management Training, with 88.57% participation, followed by Comprehensive Sexuality Education at 65.71%, and In-Service Training at 54.29%. Other notable trainings include Higher-Order Thinking Skills (34.29%), Leadership Development (31.42%), Teaching Methodologies/Strategies (48.57%), Lesson Planning Workshop (17.14%), and Psychological First Aid (17.14%). A small portion (20%) attended other unspecified seminars. These figures demonstrate a strong engagement in diverse training areas relevant to ARAL’s goals.

Level of implementation of the ARAL Program as to learners’ participation

Learner engagement is a vital indicator of the effectiveness of educational programs, particularly those designed to address foundational skill gaps, such as the ARAL Program. Established under Republic Act No. 12028, ARAL provides targeted support in literacy and numeracy for struggling students in Philippine public schools (Ballesteros & Magulod, 2022). The highest-rated item was “Pupils actively engage in reading activities” (Mean = 4.5429), followed closely by “Learners attend ARAL sessions regularly” and “Learners apply reading skills learned in ARAL to other subjects” (Mean = 4.4857 each). The lowest-rated item, “Learners complete assigned tasks during ARAL sessions” (Mean = 4.4000), still falls within the “Strongly Agree” range, indicating overall positive engagement.

This is followed by regular attendance, cross-subject application of reading skills, and improved confidence in reading aloud—all with means above 4.45. Mid-ranked indicators include attentiveness, motivation, and participation in group reading. The lowest scores were for task completion (4.4000) and asking questions (4.2000), suggesting areas where learners

may need more support. Despite these lower scores, all indicators remain within the “Strongly Agree” category, reflecting a generally high level of engagement.

The findings affirm that the ARAL Program is effectively engaging learners and promoting literacy development. However, the slightly lower scores in task completion and learner inquiry suggest opportunities for improvement. To enhance participation further, program implementers should consider integrating collaborative and inquiry-based activities, offering differentiated tasks tailored to diverse learner profiles, and strengthening parental involvement.

Level of implementation of the ARAL Program as to intervention quality and delivery

The highest-rated items were “Teaching methods encourage independent reading” and “Teachers provide timely feedback and corrections,” both with a mean of 4.6571. These results suggest that the program is successfully fostering autonomy and responsiveness in literacy instruction. The lowest-rated item, “Lessons are delivered clearly and at the right pace” (Mean = 4.4000), still reflects strong agreement but points to a potential area for refinement in instructional delivery. The top-rated indicators—independent reading and timely feedback highlight the program’s strength in promoting learner agency and instructional support.

These are followed closely by scaffolding strategies (Mean = 4.6000), individualized remedial approaches (4.5714), and the use of appropriate instructional strategies for non-readers and suitable learning materials (both at 4.5429). Mid-ranked items include phonics-based instruction (4.5143) and engaging activities (4.4857). The lowest scores were for time allocation (4.3143) and lesson clarity and pacing (4.4000), suggesting that while the program is generally well-received, there may be inconsistencies in how time and clarity are managed across classrooms. The data confirms that the ARAL Program is effectively engaging learners through well-structured and meaningful interventions. However, to further enhance its impact, improvements in lesson clarity and pacing should be prioritized.

These can be addressed through focused teacher training, peer mentoring, and reflective feedback loops that involve both educators and learners. Strengthening these areas will ensure that instructional delivery remains consistent and responsive, allowing learners not only to participate but also to thrive in their academic recovery journey.

Level of implementation of the ARAL Program as to program effectiveness and impact

Evaluating the effectiveness of the ARAL Program requires a close examination of its impact on learners’ reading fluency, comprehension, motivation, and overall literacy development, as recent studies emphasize that targeted interventions must be assessed not only in terms of decoding skills but also in fostering sustained engagement and comprehension growth (Kim, Boyle, & Nakamura, 2020).

All ten indicators fall within the “Strongly Agree” category, with an overall mean score of 4.41142 and a standard deviation of 0.560796, indicating a high level of consensus. The highest-rated item, “The program reduces the number of non-readers in class” (Mean = 4.6000), confirms that the program is achieving one of its core objectives. Other highly rated indicators include “Pupils show greater confidence in oral reading” (Mean = 4.5429), “The ARAL Program improved learners’ reading comprehension” (Mean = 4.4857), and “The ARAL Program improved learners’ reading fluency” (Mean = 4.4571).

The lowest-rated item, “Learners demonstrate better performance in classroom reading tasks” (Mean = 4.2571), still reflects strong agreement but suggests room for improvement in task-based outcomes.

The data reveal that the most significant perceived impact of the ARAL Program is its ability to reduce the number of non-readers, followed by gains in oral reading confidence and comprehension. These results suggest that the program is effectively addressing foundational literacy challenges. Mid-ranked indicators such as increased interest in reading (Mean = 4.3429) and reduced teacher assistance (Mean = 4.3143) show progress toward learner independence. The lowest-rated item, while still positive, indicates that improvements in classroom reading performance may be less immediate or visible, pointing to the need for sustained support and differentiated strategies to reinforce comprehension and fluency.

Level of implementation of the ARAL Program as to monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) ensures the ARAL Program's effectiveness by tracking learner progress and validating instructional approaches. It also guides future interventions, policy adjustments, and resource allocation for sustained literacy and numeracy support (Ballesteros & Magulod, 2022).

All ten indicators fall within the "Strongly Agree" category, with an overall mean score of 4.45428 and a standard deviation of 0.624814, indicating strong consensus among respondents. The highest-rated item, "Peer and self-assessment are encouraged during reading sessions" (Mean = 4.6571), reflects widespread support for collaborative and reflective learning. Other highly rated practices include "Evaluation results are used to improve the next cycle of ARAL sessions" (Mean = 4.6286), and "Monitoring tools (checklists, rubrics, tests) are effectively used" (Mean = 4.5429).

The lowest-rated item, "Teachers maintain updated records of learners' reading performance" (Mean = 4.2571), still shows strong agreement but highlights an area for improvement in documentation. The highest-rated indicators emphasize learner-centered assessment practices, such as peer/self-assessment and the use of evaluation results to refine instruction.

These are followed by consistent use of monitoring tools and regular tracking of reading progress. Mid-ranked items include feedback from supervisors and parental involvement, both essential for accountability and support. The lowest-rated item—record-keeping—suggests that while educators value assessment, systematic documentation may be less consistently practiced. This gap could affect long-term tracking and instructional personalization, underscoring the need for more robust data management systems.

The data confirms that the ARAL Program is grounded in strong M&E practices, with a clear emphasis on formative assessment and instructional responsiveness. To enhance its effectiveness, implementers should consider digitizing learner records for streamlined tracking, offering training on data interpretation to support instructional adjustments, and involving parents and school leaders more actively in feedback loops. These strategies will strengthen the program's accountability, ensure instructional decisions are evidence-based, and promote sustained literacy gains among learners.

Reading proficiency of Grade Three learners

The largest group, 15 learners (35.7%), fell under the Developing category with scores of 70–79, and 9 learners (21.4%) remained at the Beginning level with scores below 70. The data reveal that the highest proportion of learners are in the Developing category, indicating that while many pupils are progressing, they still need consistent support in fluency and

comprehension. The next largest group is the Proficient learners, showing that nearly one-third of the class has attained satisfactory reading skills.

The findings imply that while the ARAL Program has contributed to improving reading proficiency among Grade Three learners, a considerable number remain below the desired mastery level. This underscores the need for sustained, differentiated instruction and targeted remediation, especially for those in the Beginning and Developing categories.

Significant relationship between the reading proficiency level of Grade Three learners

Several relationships were found to be statistically significant at both the 0.05 and 0.01 levels. For example, variable 2 shows a strong positive correlation with variable 4 ($r = .837$, $p < .01$), while variable 5 is significantly related to variable 9 ($r = .674$, $p < .01$). Moderate correlations were also observed, such as between variable 1 and variable 5 ($r = .576$, $p < .01$), and between variable 10 and variable 2 ($r = .668$, $p < .01$). These results highlight multiple interconnected factors influencing learners' reading proficiency.

The strongest correlation was observed between variable 2 and variable 4 ($r = .837$, $p < .01$), indicating a very high relationship between these two aspects of program implementation and learner performance. This was followed by variable 10 and variable 4 ($r = .667$, $p < .01$), and variable 10 and variable 2 ($r = .668$, $p < .01$), both showing strong associations. Moderate correlations such as variable 5 and variable 9 ($r = .674$, $p < .01$) and variable 3 and variable 5 ($r = .501$, $p < .01$) suggest meaningful but less intense relationships. The lowest correlations, such as variable 1 and variable 8 ($r = .197$, $p > .05$), were not statistically significant, indicating weak or negligible connections.

The findings imply that reading proficiency is significantly influenced by multiple interrelated factors, particularly those connected to program implementation quality, learner engagement, and instructional delivery. Strong correlations suggest that improvements in these areas directly enhance reading outcomes. Conversely, weaker or non-significant relationships highlight areas where program adjustments may be needed to strengthen impact.

Issues and barriers encountered by the teachers during implementation of the ARAL Program

Teachers reported challenges in implementing the program due to limited resources, unclear guidelines, and additional workload demands. Rural schools faced difficulties such as poor connectivity, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient instructional materials. These barriers constrained teachers' ability to deliver quality interventions and highlighted the need for stronger institutional support and localized strategies to sustain program effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Based on findings, it is concluded that the ARAL Program significantly improved literacy among early-grade non-readers, with measurable gains in fluency, comprehension, and word recognition, affirming its effectiveness as a targeted intervention. These results align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory, which emphasize scaffolded instruction and guided practice. Additionally, they align with Adaptive Learning and Differentiated Instruction, which highlight diagnostic-based and flexible approaches to meet diverse learner needs. However, systemic challenges such as limited resources, minimal institutional support, and the absence of functional school libraries contradict Constructivist and Metacognitive principles that require enriched environments and opportunities for independent learning. Overall, the program's success depends on

strengthening infrastructure, allocating resources effectively, and enhancing teacher capacity to sustain equitable literacy outcomes.

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