

Bridging the Learning Gaps: The ARAL Program's Role in Post-Pandemic Education Recovery

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ABSTRACT

When schools finally reopened after prolonged COVID-19 closures, teachers across the Philippines were met with a sobering reality: many learners had returned to classrooms several grade levels behind, particularly in reading and numeracy. National and international studies confirm that the pandemic significantly widened pre-existing learning gaps, with the most severe losses borne by learners from low-income and resource-constrained communities. In response, the Department of Education introduced the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program as a nationwide intervention to restore foundational competencies

through targeted remediation, reinforcement, and enrichment. This commentary critically examines the ARAL Program as a post-pandemic recovery initiative, drawing on policy documents, empirical research, and field-based insights from school implementation. While ARAL reflects a strong institutional commitment to equity and learning recovery, its early rollout reveals persistent challenges related to teacher preparedness, instructional resources, implementation pace, and sustainability. This paper argues that learning recovery cannot rely on short-term remediation alone. Instead, ARAL must be strengthened through anticipatory planning, sustained teacher support, robust monitoring systems, and contextualized implementation. By grounding policy analysis in the lived experiences of teachers and learners, this commentary calls for a more deliberate and human-centered approach to academic recovery—one that ensures no Filipino learner is left behind in the post-pandemic education landscape.

Keywords: *Learning Recovery; Literacy and Numeracy; Post-Pandemic Schooling; Teacher Capacity; Educational Equity; Philippine Basic Education*

INTRODUCTION

When face-to-face classes resumed after more than two years of intermittent closures, many Filipino teachers encountered classrooms that felt unfamiliar. Learners struggled to read grade-level texts, perform basic computations, and sustain attention during lessons. These challenges were not anecdotal; they reflected a global education crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted schooling for over 1.6 billion learners worldwide (UNESCO, 2021). In the Philippines, prolonged reliance on modular and remote learning modalities—implemented under conditions of unequal access and limited home support—intensified learning loss, particularly among early-grade and disadvantaged learners (Azevedo et al., 2021; Bernardo et al., 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that pandemic-induced learning loss disproportionately affected learners from low-income households, rural areas, and schools with limited instructional resources (World Bank, 2022). Declines in reading fluency, comprehension, and foundational numeracy were widely reported, raising concerns that temporary disruptions could translate into long-term educational and economic consequences if left unaddressed (Engzell et al., 2021).

Recognizing the urgency of academic recovery, the Department of Education launched the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program as a national response to accumulated learning gaps (DepEd, 2024). Anchored on remediation, reinforcement, and enrichment, ARAL seeks to provide structured academic support beyond regular classroom instruction. More than a remedial initiative, the program represents an attempt to rebuild learning routines, restore learner confidence, and reaffirm education's role as a social equalizer. This commentary situates ARAL within the broader discourse on post-pandemic education recovery and examines the extent to which the program can move Philippine basic education from crisis response toward sustained learning resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Loss and the Imperative for Recovery

The global literature on learning loss underscores the scale and urgency of post-pandemic recovery. Simulation studies estimate that extended school closures may reduce lifetime earnings and widen inequality if learning gaps are not systematically addressed (Azevedo et al., 2021; Kaffenberger, 2021). Empirical research from multiple countries demonstrates measurable declines in achievement, with younger learners and those from disadvantaged backgrounds experiencing the greatest setbacks (Engzell et al., 2021).

In the Philippine context, national assessments and scholarly analyses confirm similar trends. Bernardo et al. (2023) document significant declines in literacy and numeracy performance following the pandemic, particularly among primary-grade learners. These findings reinforce international evidence that recovery efforts must prioritize foundational skills, as early deficits compound over time and undermine later learning.

What Makes Learning Recovery Effective

Research on learning recovery emphasizes that remediation is most effective when it is targeted, diagnostic, and supported by well-prepared teachers (Kaffenberger, 2021; OECD, 2021). One-size-fits-all interventions and compressed timelines risk overwhelming both learners and educators, especially when implemented alongside regular instructional demands. Scholars further stress the importance of psychosocial support, noting that anxiety, disengagement, and reduced motivation often accompany academic setbacks (OECD, 2021).

Local education commentaries and policy analyses echo these concerns. Early reports on ARAL implementation point to uneven school readiness, limited instructional materials, and insufficient teacher preparation, despite the program's strong policy intent (Manila Bulletin, 2024; Philstar, 2025). These gaps highlight the recurring challenge of translating national reform initiatives into meaningful classroom practice.

From Policy Intent to Classroom Reality

The ARAL Program reflects a decisive policy commitment to learning recovery and educational equity (DepEd, 2024). However, its initial rollout illustrates a familiar tension in Philippine education reform: ambitious national initiatives introduced under urgent conditions, with limited time for capacity-building at the school level. Teachers reported compressed preparation periods, unclear assessment protocols, and the added burden of designing remediation activities alongside regular teaching responsibilities (Philstar, 2025).

International evidence suggests that learning recovery programs succeed only when teachers are adequately trained, supported, and given pedagogical autonomy within clear instructional frameworks (UNESCO, 2021). Without these conditions, recovery initiatives risk becoming compliance-driven exercises rather than transformative learning interventions.

Strengthening ARAL through Contextualized Implementation

Learning recovery is most effective when national policy is translated into locally grounded action. In the Division of Southern Leyte—characterized by coastal, upland, and geographically isolated schools—implementation must be sensitive to disparities in access, resources, and disaster vulnerability. The following actions are proposed to strengthen ARAL as a sustainable recovery framework.

1. Strengthening Teacher Capacity

Teachers are the frontline agents of learning recovery. Division-based mentoring systems, anchored in Learning Action Cells and supported by master teachers and instructional supervisors, can provide sustained guidance on diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, and formative feedback. Such

localized support moves professional development beyond one-off webinars toward continuous instructional coaching.

2. Ensuring Context-Appropriate Learning Resources

ARAL learning materials must remain flexible and adaptable to varied school contexts. A localized resource bank that integrates DepEd-developed materials with teacher-generated, culturally responsive content can help address disparities between central and remote schools. Printed modules should continue to play a central role in geographically isolated areas, supplemented by offline digital resources where feasible.

3. Expanding the Scope of Learning Recovery

While literacy and numeracy are critical, learners affected by prolonged disruption also require support in science learning, socio-emotional development, and digital skills. Gradually integrating these domains through thematic remediation and project-based tasks can promote holistic recovery and learner engagement.

4. Institutionalizing Monitoring and Support

Reliable data are essential for effective recovery. Standardized diagnostic tools, progress-tracking systems, and developmental monitoring mechanisms can help school leaders adjust interventions and share effective practices. Monitoring should prioritize improvement and support rather than compliance.

5. Strengthening Community and LGU Partnerships

Strong community ties in Southern Leyte provide an important foundation for learning recovery. Partnerships with barangay councils, parent-teacher associations, and local government units can support ARAL implementation through learning spaces, volunteer tutoring, nutrition programs, and logistical assistance.

6. Securing Sustainable Funding

For ARAL to endure beyond short-term recovery, funding must be predictable and institutionalized within DepEd structures. Division-level advocacy for earmarked learning recovery funds, complemented by LGU and stakeholder support, is essential to prevent uneven implementation and program fatigue.

CONCLUSION

The ARAL Program represents a critical step in the Philippine education system's response to pandemic-induced learning loss. Yet recovery cannot be achieved through remediation alone. It requires preparedness, sustained investment, and trust in teachers as professionals capable of responding to learners' diverse needs. By strengthening capacity, resources, and governance structures, ARAL can evolve from an emergency intervention into a durable framework for learning recovery and resilience. In doing so, it can reaffirm a fundamental promise of education: that every learner, regardless of circumstance, deserves the opportunity to learn, recover, and thrive.

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