



PHENOMENOLOGICAL JOURNEY OF ARAL IMPLEMENTERS IN THE

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of ARAL Reading Tutors in the Division of Angeles City as the basis for a proposed professional development program. The study addressed the persistent challenges in reading literacy in the Philippines and the critical role of reading tutors in implementing the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program under Republic Act No. 12028. Specifically, it examined how ARAL Reading Tutors experienced their roles in terms of instructional challenges, institutional and professional support, motivations, and perceived gaps in program implementation. Moreover, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to capture the essence of the participants lived experiences. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and included ARAL Reading Tutors deployed in public secondary schools within the Division of Angeles City who had rendered at least one year of service as ARAL Reading Tutors. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews and were guided by an interview protocol aligned with the research questions. The collected data were analyzed using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method, which involved transcription, bracketing, holistic reading, meaning unit formulation, and thematic development. The findings of the study suggested that the essence of the phenomenon is revealed in the realization that frontline educators help to reconcile national literacy policies with the practical application thereof not from institutional arrangements, but rather by making sacrifices, adapting creatively, and engaging relationally. Also, the findings of this study would be used as the basis for a proposed professional development program aimed at enhancing instructional effectiveness, professional support, and tutor well-being.

Keywords: ARAL Program, Reading Tutors, Phenomenological Study, Lived Experiences, Reading Intervention

1 INTRODUCTION

Reading is the cornerstone of all academic learning (Librea et al., 2023). The ability to comprehend textual inputs serve as a foundational literacy skill and a critical component of language acquisition (Casinto, 2025). In fact, the United Nations has emphasized this through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. According to recent global data, only 58% of children achieved minimum reading proficiency, while proficiency levels dropped by 10 points among lower-secondary students, highlighting a growing literacy crisis (UN, 2026).

In Southeast Asia, Cambodia has been identified as having the lowest-performing young readers, with 24% of children demonstrating very low proficiency (UNICEF, 2021). Similarly, Laos and the Philippines both reported that 25% of children exhibit low proficiency, reflecting only basic reading skills such as identifying relationships between words and meanings (UNICEF, 2021).

In the Philippines, recent international assessments in reading have revealed that Filipino learners had a dismal performance at the basic education level. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) 2019 data substantiated that even after five years of formal schooling, approximately 70% of students were unable to meet regional and global standards (Casinto, 2025). This emphasizes an urgent need to address issues on reading literacy in the Philippines.

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Filipino students obtained an average score of 340 in reading literacy, which is significantly below the OECD average of 487 (DepEd, 2019). Furthermore, only 19.4% of Filipino students reached the minimum proficiency level. More recently, the World Bank reported that 90% of Filipino children aged 10 are considered learning poor, meaning they are unable to read and understand a simple text (Lu, 2024).

There have been many efforts to identify the root causes of this social phenomenon. In general the following factors have been identified to have contributed to low reading literacy skills viz: (1) lack of mastery of reading elements, (2) inclusion of learners-at-risk, (3) lack of reading enthusiasm, (4) teacher's incompetence, (5) shortage in reading materials and facilities, (6) parental involvement, and (7) student health. In line with these, Dacanay (2024) investigated the factors influencing low reading literacy skills among elementary schools in the Philippines. The findings of the study substantiated that limited teacher training and instructional practices, access to age-appropriate reading materials, and resources, and economic disparities hinder literacy development among students.

On the other hand, Chavez (2025) assessed the school-level predictor variables of reading literacy performance in the Philippines. For student-level predictors, the study revealed that there is a negative relationship between learning-related skills and reading performance. The said relationship showed that students who reported difficulties in reading comprehension tended to achieve lower scores. It was also revealed that school-level socioeconomic status significantly influenced the relationship between student-level predictors and reading performance.

Interestingly, Kilag et al. (2023) using a mixed methods approach disclosed that learners faced difficulties in decoding, fluency, motivation, and comprehension with a relatively low frequency of reading. Similarly, Idulog et al. (2023) delved into the challenges and potential areas for improvement in terms of the reading abilities of Filipino students. The study revealed that a significant number of students need help in terms of reading comprehension, critical thinking, and vocabulary development. It further provided that poor reading abilities among Filipino students can be attributed to various factors inclusive of lack of resources and socioeconomic factors.

For a wider effect of this educational crisis in the Philippines, Gatcho et al. (2024) revealed that perennial problems within literacy education hamper efficient, quality, and accessible education to the young population. This likewise provided a picture between urban wealth schools and rural-poor localities, declining rate of parental involvement, myopic view of metrics among teachers, and misunderstanding of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Policy among stakeholders; hence, problems such as these are multifaceted and interrelated.

The proliferation of non-readers or otherwise students who cannot read or can read but without comprehension, the Philippine government has taken decisive actions through legislation and promulgations of different programs. One of which is the [Local] Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning Program (ARAL) program. Based on the findings of Morales et al. (2026), results showed that reading dosage has recently been recognized as a critical factor in the success of reading intervention programs, referring to the amount of time, frequency, and intensity of reading instruction provided to learners. The implementation of the Local ARAL Program revealed that structured reading interventions delivered within a specific duration significantly improved learners' reading performance. The findings showed that learners progressed from low emerging readers to grade-level ready readers through consistent and targeted instruction. This signifies that the effectiveness of reading interventions is not solely dependent on the strategies employed but also on the appropriate dosage of instruction.

In contrast, Aguirre et al. (2024) evaluated the effectiveness of Basic Education Remediation Kits (BERKs) in the improvement of reading skills among novice readers. Through a quasi-experimental research design and the use of pre-test and post test, the study was able to reveal that an increase in mean scores was observed after the implementation of the remediation kits as proven by the significantly different statistical results for the pre-test and post test. However, the study noted that the effectiveness of the said remediation varies depending on the reading level of the learner.

The ARAL program has been institutionalized when Republic Act No. 12028 was enacted by Congress in 2024. The said law was anchored on the policy of the State to protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels while ensuring educational access for all. Through DepEd Memorandum No. 064, s.2025, implementing guidelines for the ARAL Program have been elaborated. It provides that low and high emerging learners in Key Stage 1 and learners in the Frustration level in Key Stages 2 and 3 would be prioritized. Key Stage 1 involves explicit, multi-sensory instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, and word structure. For Key Stage 2, reading learning competencies

would be derived from Grade 4 to 6 English curriculum to strengthen the foundational and grade-level reading skills of learners.

Concerning the implementation of the said program, Eamiguel and Siat (2025) found that involvement in the ARAL Reading Program improved confidence of readers as well as fundamental literacy skills. Moreover, the study showed the significance of teacher scaffolding and structured intervention to improve reading skills and at the same time, maintain interest among students. In contradistinction, Silagan et al. (2025) disclosed that that ARAL aligned reading programs had a small to moderate positive effect on Filipino students. However, there is a need to consider the specific needs and context of the school when selecting and implementing ARAL-aligned reading programs as provided by the study.

Notwithstanding the growing body of literature on reading literacy, reading interventions, and instructional strategies in the Philippines, most studies have primarily focused on learners' reading performance, program effectiveness, and teacher practices in general. While these studies provide valuable insights into reading development, there remains limited research that specifically explores the lived experiences of ARAL Reading Tutors who directly implement reading interventions under the ARAL Program. In addition, although Republic Act No. 12028 has institutionalized the ARAL Program, motivations, and professional needs of ARAL Reading Tutors. This gap highlighted the need for a phenomenological inquiry that would examine their experiences to generate context-based insights that could serve as a foundation for a more responsive and effective support program.

Accordingly, the present research investigation sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the lived experiences of ARAL Reading Tutors in the Division of Angeles City in implementing the ARAL Reading Program?
- What meanings and motivations do ARAL Reading Tutors ascribe to their work, and how do these influence their commitment and sustainability?
- What challenges and difficulties do ARAL Reading Tutors encounter in the performance of their roles as frontline literacy workers?
- What institutional and professional support do ARAL Reading Tutors receive from the Department of Education, and how do they perceive their adequacy?
- Based on the lived experiences of the participants, what professional development program may be proposed to enhance the effectiveness and well-being of ARAL Reading Tutors?

2 METHODOLOGY

The participants of the study were Junior High School ARAL Reading Tutors actively deployed in high schools within the Division of Angeles City. They were selected through purposive sampling. Using phenomenological research design, human experiences or perceptions and understand a specific phenomenon could provide a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study. The data were obtained through semi-structured in-depth interview. The data underwent statistical treatment and analysis through Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method. All these processes were made pursuant to pertinent laws, rules and regulations, and ethical considerations in the collection, processing, management, and interpretation.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through Max Van Manen's four existential life worlds (Lived Relation – relationality, Lived Materiality/Space – spatiality, Lived Time – temporality, and Lived Body – corporeality), the basic essence of being an ARAL reading tutor becomes apparent through the process of navigating gaps within the system through vocational dedication and relational persistence.

Lived Relation (Relationality): The core of the tutorial process is a deep relational connection between tutors, learners, and immediate peers. In the face of perennial lack of resources and administrative oversight, tutors' main source of motivation comes from seeing the achievements of learners in concrete terms, like the progression of students from being illiterate to becoming literate.

Lived Materiality and Space (Spatiality): The physical world of the ARAL program is characterized by a serious lack of learning resources and mismatch between policies and practice. Tutors face difficulties of the shortage of pre-printed paper-based kits and corresponding teaching modules.

Lived Time (Temporality): The dynamics of time produce constant operational tension, mainly because of the scheduling of the tutoring session towards the end of the normal school day. The tutors have to contend with tiredness,

restlessness, and absenteeism of students due to fatigue. In order to surmount the temporal constraints, the tutors develop great patience, teaching slowly so that they can re-develop basic phonics skills.

Lived Body (Corporeality): Through their body knowledge as tutors, when faced with an immense skill gap like secondary Grade 8 students who cannot recognize sounds of the alphabet, they go through vulnerability due to lack of formal training in dealing with such situations.

3.1 Lived Experiences of Aral Reading Tutors in Implementing the Aral Reading Program

The lived experiences of ARAL reading tutors illustrate the existence of a complex interplay between external barriers and internal professional satisfaction based on Max van Manen's theory of existential lifeworlds of Lived Materiality, Lived Temporality, Lived Corporeality, and Lived Relationality. All participants identify the existence of a conflict of Lived Materiality and Lived Space, during which the tutors face material scarcity and self-reliance on their part due to severe resource limitation. These results correspond to the findings of the academic literature dedicated to the process of execution of remedial programs, where Okyere (2025) and Biesta et al. (2021) refer to the "street-level implementation gap" and lack of access to materials and funds among teachers.

With regard to Lived Body (Corporeality), tutors face substantial emotional vulnerability and pedagogical dissonance in the event of having to deal with extreme skill differentials unprepared. It is true according to research conducted in teacher self-efficacy, that teachers feel instructional mastery reduced when put in specialized roles as remedial tutors without proper professional development for such (Law et al., 2025; Avramidis et al., 2019; Sonsupap et al., 2025).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, the Lived Relation (relationality) dimension acts as the chief catalyst in keeping tutors motivated in their work.

3.2 Meanings and Motivations of the Reading Tutors

The exploration of the meanings and motivators behind the ARAL reading tutors proves to be closely tied together by intrinsic psychological motives, vocational identity and relation, organized through the existential lifeworlds of Max van Manen. In the lifeworld of the ARAL tutors, Lived Relation (relationality) appears to be the primary basis of their engagement in the activity. These findings corroborate what Ryan and Deci (2000)'s Self-Determination Theory stated that intrinsic motivation is driven by relatedness and competence and, thus, when teachers see the actual effect of their efforts and develop a meaningful connection with learners, intrinsic motivation helps them turn an external task into an intrinsically fulfilling endeavor.

A consistent theme in both Lived Relation and Lived Body (corporeality) is the altruistic servitude and vocational commitment which goes beyond monetary incentives. Such an altruistic attitude fits well into the research on the teacher passion and commitment, proving that the most dedicated teachers are often dependent on moral purpose and calling to support their work in the absence of organizational incentives (Norgren Hansson, 2025).

The existential lifeworlds of Lived Body and Lived Time (temporality) shed additional light on how passion from within and legacy from without provide protective buffers against burnout. Hence, the idea about the "inner landscape of teaching," states that teachers integrate their daily work with their fundamental self and purpose, they have enough psychological strength to withstand the fatigue and neglect from outside (Sandoval-Obando et al., 2025).

3.3 Challenges and Difficulties Encountered by ARAL reading Tutors

The thematic analysis of challenges and difficulties faced by ARAL reading tutors indicates a number of systemic, structural and interpersonal pressures that affect the process of frontline literacy instruction, using Max van Manen's existential lifeworlds approach. In Lived Materiality and Lived Space, the shortage of physical educational materials, misaligned modules and unkept promises by the administration cause numerous problems when delivering pedagogical instructions.

According to Teacher Participant 1, material insufficiency leads teachers to use their own time and money to find the appropriate learning resources.

It is even worse for Teacher Participant 2 who states that at first there were not enough appropriate teaching modules, and teachers had to conduct online search of information related to English reading on their own. Teacher Participant 3 feels disappointed about the promises of having prepackaged teaching kits that were promised during the orientation of the programs.

The issue becomes more acute for Teacher Participant 4 as well as the contradiction between budget allocations announced publicly and real-life conditions of not having materials to work with that tutors need to produce on their

own. It is even harder for Teacher Participant 2 because of personal economic troubles that result from delay in payment and service credit issues. Teacher Participant 6 notes that absence of hardcopy resources takes away valuable time that should be devoted to actual instructions. All these structural difficulties clearly demonstrate the application of Lipsky's theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy that states that frontline public sector workers constantly have to fulfill ambitious policies under the condition of severe resource shortages (Chang & Brewer, 2022).

In Lived Time (temporality) and Lived Relation (relationality), the tutors experience very difficult logistics, student burnout, and communication issues. Teacher Participant 1, Teacher Participant 2, and Teacher Participant 6 all point out that ARAL classes scheduled at the end of the school day lead to high student fatigue, restlessness, skipping of classes, and truancy. Moreover, Teacher Participant 1 highlights that the students feel stigmatized and isolated from other peers, which leads to a lack of motivation to engage in the process. Teacher Participant 3 emphasizes the additional emotional and instructional work required to get through students' indifference and demonstrate the necessity of the program.

On the other hand, Teacher Participant 3 also points out institutional ambiguities and difficulties in communication. Teacher Participant 4 mentions how balancing teaching duties and tutoring causes split focus and workload problems. Moreover, Teacher Participant 6 indicates language and understanding issues that cause the need for continuous instructional efforts to make the material simpler for the students. Finally, Teacher Participant 7 agrees with the relational issues above and mentions the frustration caused by unrealized expectations concerning money payment or service credit. All of these findings confirm that teachers' stress factors, which include time pressure, administrative ambiguity, role conflict, and unmotivated students (Hogan & Thompson, 2025).

On the part of Lived Body (Corporeality), tutors encounter immense emotional fear and instructional confusion in dealing with such profound literacy challenges, which do not have an official training program. Teacher Participant 4 draws attention to the fact that secondary learners in Grade 8 are unable to identify sounds corresponding to different letters.

Moreover, Teacher Participant 7 draws attention to the challenge of managing learners who have problems both decoding words and comprehending the meaning of the text they are reading. Lack of formal training aggravates such challenges, since Teacher Participant 5 complains about being confused and directionless without any scope and sequence and also about difficulties with managing mixed-ability classroom groupings.

In turn, Teacher Participant 5 feels doubtful about her professionalism as a reading tutor. Professional vulnerability can be attributed to Teacher Participant 7, as he mentions the lack of formal seminars as a basis of being deprived of a road map for effective execution of remediation. Such challenges are consistent with findings concerning effective teacher professional development, because implementation of complicated teaching strategies without content-related training reduces instructional efficiency, lowers teacher self-efficacy, and affects learning outcomes (Murphy, 2020).

3.4 Received Institutional and Professional Supports of ARAL Reading Tutors

Received institutional and professional support analysis identifies a substantial contrast between immediate collegial support and upper management provision. The most productive support system according to the tutors is found in collaboration at the grassroot level within their respective immediate schools. These findings correspond to the framework on teacher cultures, where he posits that powerful professional learning communities and peer culture are necessary buffers that allow teachers to continue working when the system fails (Johnson et al., 2026).

On the other hand, analysis through Lived Space (spatiality), Lived Materiality, and Lived Body (corporeality) shows the presence of widespread structural inefficiencies in regards to professional development, material delivery, and administration communication (Polinar et al., 2025).

The lack of material and financial support is further complicated by delayed incentives and lack of resources. The lack of support and delayed incentives mentioned by the teachers coincide with Okyere's (2025) perspective on educational change which suggests that any top-down change efforts are doomed to failure because any policies are not supported by high-quality material provision and compensation mechanisms.

With all these, it has been held that the experiences of ARAL reading tutors are characterized by a tension between systemic constraints that are very serious and the devotion that is personal. According to van Manen's existential lifeworlds, there is a disparity between the essential policy in education and its implementation on the ground.

The first one includes the Lived Materiality and Lived Space. In them, tutors are faced with a problem of resource scarcity, no existence of standard physical learning packages, the mismatch of modules, and unfulfilled orientation in regard to instructional kits and funds. As for the Lived Time, arranging tutorials during the last part of the working day

for school leads to exhaustion, restlessness, class avoidance, and truancy of learners as well as distracting tutors' attention and additional stress. Lived Body is associated with the complete lack of any training workshops which makes tutors confused and doubtful about themselves and their work and creates imposter feelings when dealing with serious secondary literacy issues like lack of ability to recognize alphabet sounds among Grade 8 learners.

However, in Lived Relation, tutors have the source of strength which comes from altruistic servitude, vocational commitment, and passion. Validation of relational nature which is based on breakthrough moments of learners, encouragement of learners and support of department heads, reading coordinators, and class advisers acts as the key source of support.

4 CONCLUSION

In its entirety, the essence of the ARAL reading tutor role emerges as one of transformative resilience through vocational commitment in the face of systemic neglect. Following van Manen's philosophy of lifeworlds in phenomenology, the essence of the phenomenon is revealed in the realization that frontline educators help to reconcile national literacy policies with the practical application thereof not from institutional arrangements, but rather by making sacrifices, adapting creatively, and engaging relationally.

The tutors overcome operational difficulties including out-of-pocket costs for instruction, delayed incentive payments, and unfavorable afternoon scheduling, through the alignment of their self-identity to a noble call to serve illiterate learners. In the end, the essence of the experience proves that although institutional weaknesses may initially pose professional vulnerability and instructional stress, the transformative relational connection made between the tutor and learner makes adversity into an incredibly rewarding process of education.

Finally, to tackle the gaps and help the frontliners, there are three tangible practical outputs that come out of the research:

- ARAL Teacher Training & Mentorship Program: A localized competency-based professional development framework centered on diagnostic reading techniques, multi-level classroom management, and effective student motivation to remove self-doubt and confusion among teachers.
- Remedial Scheduling Framework: An administrative policy guide suggesting the incorporation of ARAL sessions within the official school day or co-curricular period to address the problems of fatigue, absence, and truancy among students.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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