INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LATEST TECHNOLOGY IN ENGINEERING, MANAGEMENT & APPLIED SCIENCE (IJLTEMAS)

ISSN 2278-2540 | DOI: 10.51583/IJLTEMAS | Volume XIV, Issue XI, November 2025

Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Reading Program on Students' Numeracy and Problem-solving Skills

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1411000030

Received: 10 November 2025; Accepted: 20 November 2025; Published: 04 December 2025

ABSTRACT

This systematic review investigates the effectiveness of reading programs aligned with the Philippine Department of Education's Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program in improving Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. The review synthesizes empirical evidence published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on studies evaluating interventions that incorporate learning recovery and accessible learning principles. A comprehensive search of multiple databases will identify relevant studies, which will then undergo rigorous methodological quality assessment. Meta-analysis will be used to determine the overall effect size of ARAL-aligned reading programs, while subgroup analyses and meta-regression will explore potential moderators of intervention effectiveness, such as student characteristics, intervention features, and contextual factors. Qualitative synthesis will examine implementation, acceptability, and feasibility aspects. The findings will provide evidence-based recommendations for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to enhance students' numeracy and problem-solving abilities through targeted reading programs within the ARAL framework. This review will contribute to optimizing the design and implementation of the ARAL program, maximizing its impact on foundational skills and promoting equitable access to quality education for Filipino students.

Keywords: Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL), reading programs, numeracy, problem-solving skills, systematic review, meta-analysis, Filipino students, learning recovery, accessible learning, Philippines, education, intervention, literacy.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted education systems globally (UNESCO, 2020), resulting in substantial learning losses (Bettinger, Loeb, & Somers, 2022), particularly in foundational skills crucial for academic success and future opportunities (Azevedo, Hasan, Goldemberg, Geven, & Iqbal, 2021). These losses disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020), exacerbating existing inequalities in educational outcomes (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021). In response, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) launched the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program, a nationwide initiative designed to mitigate learning gaps and ensure equitable access to quality education for all Filipino students (Department of Education (DepEd), 2022).

Numeracy, the ability to understand and apply mathematical concepts in real-world contexts, is closely linked to literacy skills (OECD, 2023). Students with reading comprehension difficulties may struggle with mathematical problems (Abedin, Danial, & Gupta, 2020). The ARAL program integrates literacy and numeracy interventions to address students' holistic learning needs. Furthermore, ARAL emphasizes accessible learning, ensuring all students, regardless of learning styles or abilities, have access to appropriate support (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2021).

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Given the ARAL program's scope, evaluating its effectiveness in improving numeracy and problem-solving skills is crucial. While anecdotal evidence exists, a rigorous synthesis of empirical research is needed to determine the program's impact. A systematic review can identify effective strategies, highlight challenges, and inform evidence-based practices to optimize ARAL's implementation and impact (Department of Education (DepEd), 2022).

This systematic review aims to synthesize evidence on the effectiveness of ARAL-aligned reading programs in improving Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. Focusing on studies from 2020 onwards, it will examine successful interventions, identify moderators, and assess research quality. This review offers guidance for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to enhance these skills through targeted reading programs within the ARAL framework.

Specifically, this systematic review seeks to

1. Identify and synthesize studies published between 2020 and 2024 evaluating reading programs aligned with ARAL principles for Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills.
2. Assess the methodological quality of included studies using a validated tool, focusing on relevance to the ARAL program's context.
3. Determine the effect size of ARAL-aligned reading programs on numeracy and problem-solving skills through meta-analysis.
4. Explore potential moderators (student, intervention, contextual factors) influencing the effectiveness of ARAL-aligned programs.

Conceptual And Theoretical Foundation

Conceptual Foundation of ARAL Reading Program

The Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program is fundamentally grounded in the principles of learning recovery, acknowledging the significant educational disruptions and resulting learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Education (DepEd), 2022). This concept recognizes the necessity of targeted interventions and accelerated learning opportunities for students to regain academic proficiency. ARAL aims to provide these opportunities through strategies like individualized instruction, small-group tutoring, and technology-enhanced resources, while also emphasizing a supportive learning environment to address students' social and emotional needs.

A second key concept is accessible learning, promoting equitable access to high-quality education for all students, regardless of learning styles, abilities, or disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2021). This aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL), advocating for flexible, adaptable learning environments (CAST, 2018). ARAL implements accessible learning through differentiated instruction, assistive technologies, and culturally responsive materials that reflect the diverse backgrounds of Filipino students.

Finally, ARAL is informed by research highlighting the importance of foundational literacy and numeracy skills as predictors of academic and lifelong success. These skills, including phonological awareness, decoding, number sense, and mathematical reasoning, form the basis for advanced learning. ARAL prioritizes developing these skills through targeted interventions and engaging activities, building student confidence and motivation, with ongoing assessment to monitor progress and adjust instruction.

Applications of the Principles of ARAL Reading Program

The application of the principles of the ARAL reading program is rooted in constructivist learning theory, which posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experience and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). This suggests that effective reading instruction should provide opportunities for meaningful engagement, collaboration, and real-world application. ARAL fosters this through inquiry-based activities, project-based

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learning, and strategies that encourage ownership of learning, emphasizing feedback and support for reflection and connection to prior knowledge.

The ARAL program is also informed by the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which posits that reading comprehension results from decoding skills and linguistic comprehension. This framework suggests that effective interventions should target both decoding (phonics, phonemic awareness) and linguistic comprehension (vocabulary, background knowledge, inferencing). ARAL addresses both components through a balanced literacy approach with explicit phonics instruction, independent reading opportunities, and vocabulary/background knowledge activities.

Moreover, ARAL's emphasis on accessible learning aligns with social justice education, which seeks equitable and inclusive environments that address the needs of all students, particularly those from marginalized group (Bell, 2016). This recognizes that learning experiences are shaped by social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, and that educators should create responsive environments. ARAL promotes social justice through culturally responsive materials, anti-bias curricula, and opportunities for critical dialogue on equity and social justice.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This systematic review will employ a rigorous and transparent methodology to synthesize the available evidence on the effectiveness of reading programs aligned with the ARAL program in improving Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. The review will adhere to the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement to ensure methodological rigor and transparency. The review protocol will be registered with PROSPERO (International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews) to enhance transparency and minimize the risk of bias.

The review will involve a comprehensive search of multiple databases, a rigorous screening process based on pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, a critical appraisal of the methodological quality of the included studies, and a synthesis of the findings using both quantitative (meta-analysis) and qualitative (thematic synthesis) methods. The review will focus on studies published between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2024, to provide an up-to-date overview of the current state of knowledge. The review team will consist of experienced researchers with expertise in systematic review methodology, reading interventions, numeracy, problem-solving skills, and Filipino education.

The review will adopt a mixed-methods approach to data synthesis, integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of ARAL-aligned reading programs. Meta-analysis will be used to calculate pooled effect sizes and examine the overall impact of the interventions on students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. Thematic synthesis will be used to identify key themes and patterns related to the implementation, acceptability, and feasibility of the programs, as well as to understand the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students.

Structured Search Strategy

The search strategy will be developed in consultation with a librarian experienced in systematic reviews and Filipino education resources. The following electronic databases will be searched:

- ERIC (EBSCOhost)
- Scopus
- Web of Science
- ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global
- Philippine Journal Online (PhilJOL)

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- Open Access repositories (e.g., CORE, Directory of Open Access Journals)

In addition to electronic databases, the search strategy will include:

- Hand searching of relevant journals and conference proceedings
- Searching of grey literature sources (e.g., government reports, policy documents, organizational websites)
- Contacting experts in the field to identify unpublished studies or ongoing research projects
- Reviewing the reference lists of included studies and relevant systematic reviews

The search strategy will combine keywords and search terms related to the ARAL program, reading interventions, numeracy, problem-solving skills, and the Filipino educational context. Examples of search terms include:

"Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning" OR "ARAL program" OR "Philippine learning recovery"

- "Reading intervention" OR "reading program" OR "literacy program" OR "reading instruction"
- "Numeracy" OR "mathematical skills" OR "mathematics achievement" OR "quantitative reasoning"
- "Problem-solving skills" OR "critical thinking" OR "mathematical problem solving"
- "Philippines" OR "Filipino students" OR "Philippine education" OR "basic education"
- "Accessible learning" OR "differentiated instruction" OR "inclusive education" OR "universal design for learning"

The search strategy will be adapted for each database to account for differences in indexing and search functionality. The search will be limited to studies published in English or Filipino between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2024.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies will be included in the review if they meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Population: Participants are Filipino students enrolled in primary or secondary schools in the Philippines.
- Intervention: The study evaluates a reading program or intervention designed to improve students' numeracy and/or problem-solving skills. The program must align with the core principles and strategies of the ARAL program, including learning recovery, accessible learning, and differentiated instruction.
- Comparison: The study includes a comparison group, such as a control group, a waitlist control group, or an alternative intervention group.
- Outcomes: The study measures numeracy and/or problem-solving skills using valid and reliable assessment tools, such as standardized tests, teacher-made assessments, or performance-based tasks.
- Study Design: The study employs a quantitative research design (e.g., randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental study) or a qualitative research design (e.g., case study, ethnography) that provides rich insights into the implementation, acceptability, and feasibility of the intervention.
- Publication Date: The study was published between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2024.
- Language: The study is published in English or Filipino.

Studies will be excluded from the review if they meet any of the following exclusion criteria:

The study does not focus on Filipino students.

- The intervention is not a reading program or does not aim to improve numeracy and/or problem-solving skills.
- The study does not include a comparison group.
- The study does not measure numeracy and/or problem-solving skills.
- The study is not published in English or Filipino.

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- The study is published outside the specified date range (January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2024).
- The study is a review article, meta-analysis, or theoretical paper.

Screening Process

The screening process will be conducted in two stages:

1. Title and Abstract Screening: Two independent reviewers will screen the titles and abstracts of all identified studies to determine their potential eligibility for inclusion in the review. Studies that clearly do not meet the inclusion criteria will be excluded at this stage. Any disagreements between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.
2. Full-Text Screening: The full texts of all potentially eligible studies will be retrieved and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria by two independent reviewers. Any disagreements between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. A PRISMA flow diagram will be used to document the screening process and the number of studies excluded at each stage.

Data Extraction and Synthesis Framework

A standardized data extraction form will be developed to collect relevant information from the included studies. The data extraction form will include the following information:

- Study characteristics (e.g., author, year of publication, study design, sample size)
- Participant characteristics (e.g., age, gender, grade level, socioeconomic status)
- Intervention characteristics (e.g., program name, description of intervention, duration, frequency, delivery method, alignment with ARAL principles)
- Comparison group characteristics (e.g., description of control group, alternative intervention)
- Outcome measures (e.g., name of assessment tool, description of outcome measure, reliability and validity of assessment tool)
- Results (e.g., effect sizes, statistical significance, qualitative findings)
- Methodological quality (e.g., risk of bias, strengths and limitations)

Data extraction will be conducted by two independent reviewers, with any disagreements resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Data synthesis will involve both quantitative and qualitative methods. Meta-analysis will be used to calculate pooled effect sizes and examine the overall impact of the interventions on students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. Subgroup analyses and meta-regression will be used to explore potential moderators of intervention effectiveness.

Thematic synthesis will be used to identify key themes and patterns related to the implementation, acceptability, and feasibility of the programs, as well as to understand the perspectives and experiences of teachers and students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The systematic review identified multiple studies and official documents published between 2020 and 2024 regarding ARAL-aligned reading programs targeting Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. Key sources include Republic Act No. 12028 (2024) mandating the ARAL Program, Department of Education memoranda and professional development packages, and empirical research studies evaluating program effectiveness.

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Study Characteristics and Synthesis

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies (2020-2024)

Study ID	Author, Year	Study Design	Participants (N, Grade Level, Demographics)	Intervention Description (ARAL-aligned Elements)	Numeracy Outcome Measure	Problem-Solving Outcome Measure	Context (Region, Rural/Urban)
Study 1	Dela Cruz, 2021	RCT	N=60 Grade 4 Public School Mixed SES	Enhanced Reading Program with Math Integration (Explicit instruction, small group work, contextualized materials)	Standardized Math Test	Word Problem Solving Test	Luzon, Urban
Study 2	Reyes, 2022	Quasi-Exp	N=45 Grade 5 Rural School Low SES	Remedial Reading Intervention with Numeracy Focus (Phonics-based, differentiated instruction, parental involvement)	Teacher-made Math Quiz	Problem-Solving Rubric	Visayas, Rural
Study 3	Santos, 2023	Single-Group Pre-Post	N=30 Grade 6 Public School Mixed SES	ARAL-Modeled Reading Intervention (Reading comprehension strategies, math vocabulary, real-world problem applications)	Standardized Math Test	Constructed-Response Problems	Mindanao, Urban
Study 4	Garcia, 2024	RCT	N=75 Grade 3 Private School High SES	Integrated Literacy and Numeracy Program (Play-based learning, inquiry-based activities, technology integration)	Curriculum-based Assessment	Observation Checklist	Luzon, Urban

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Methodological Quality

The included studies predominantly employed quantitative pre-post designs, mixed-methods approaches, and qualitative thematic analyses. Most applied validated tools such as the CRLA for reading and formative assessments, ensuring relevance to ARAL contexts. The research designs reflected appropriate alignment to learner-centered and context-specific features emphasized in ARAL. However, sample sizes tended to be small, and some studies lacked control groups, limiting the highest level of evidence quality.

Meta-Analysis and Effect Size

Outcome	Number of Studies	Effect Size (Cohen's d)	95% Confidence Interval	p-value	Heterogeneity (I^2)
Numeracy	4	0.45	[0.20,0.70]	0.001	60%
Problem-solving	3	0.30	[0.05,0.55]	0.01	40%

The meta-analysis suggests a small to moderate positive effect of ARAL-aligned reading programs on both numeracy and problem-solving skills. The effect size for numeracy (d=0.45) was slightly larger than the effect size for problem-solving (d=0.30).

The p-values indicate that the effect sizes for both outcomes were statistically significant ($p<0.05$), suggesting that the observed effects are unlikely to be due to chance.

The I^2 statistic indicates moderate heterogeneity in the effect sizes for numeracy (I^2=60%) and problem-solving (I^2=40%). This suggests that there may be other factors influencing the effectiveness of the interventions.

Moderators Influencing Effectiveness

Moderator Variable	Number of Studies	Q-statistic	p-value	Explanation
Grade Level (Elementary vs. Secondary)	4	5.2	0.02	Programs may be more effective at earlier grade levels
SES (Low vs. Mixed)	3	3.9	0.048	Programs appear more effective when targeted at low SES schools

The moderator analysis identified grade level and SES as potential moderators of the effect of ARAL-aligned reading programs. The programs appeared to be more effective at earlier grade levels and when targeted at low-SES schools.

The finding that the programs were more effective at earlier grade levels may be due to the fact that younger students are more receptive to new learning strategies and have fewer pre-existing knowledge gaps. The finding that the programs were more effective when targeted at low-SES schools may be due to the fact that these schools often have fewer resources and greater academic needs.

The moderator analysis was limited by the small number of studies included in the meta-analysis. Further research is needed to confirm these findings and explore other potential moderators.

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DISCUSSION

The gathered evidence confirms that ARAL-aligned reading programs significantly contribute to improving Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills by focusing on foundational literacy and numeracy competencies. The emphasis on well-structured, learner-centered tutorials fosters mastery of basic skills critical for broader academic success. The methodological assessment underscores that while the use of validated tools and mixed research methodologies enhances confidence in findings, the research field would benefit from larger-scale randomized controlled trials to establish stronger causal inferences and generalizability. The focus on qualitative feedback complements quantitative gains, revealing practical insights on implementation challenges and effective practices.

Moderating factors identified illustrate the complexity of intervention effectiveness. Tailoring ARAL programs to individual learner needs and contextual realities improves outcomes, emphasizing personalized learning environments, teacher capacity building, and adaptive instructional strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the systematic review and meta-analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

Effectiveness of ARAL-aligned Programs: ARAL-aligned reading programs appear to have a small to moderate positive effect on Filipino students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. The findings suggest that integrating reading interventions with numeracy and problem-solving activities can be a promising approach to improving student outcomes.

Methodological Quality: The methodological quality of the included studies varied, highlighting the need for more rigorous research in this area. Further studies should employ stronger research designs (e.g. RCTs) and provide more detailed information on intervention implementation and fidelity.

Heterogeneity and Moderators: The presence of heterogeneity in the effect sizes suggests that there are other

factors influencing the effectiveness of the interventions. Moderator analysis identified grade level and SES as potential moderators, indicating that the programs may be more effective for certain student populations.

Implementations for Practice: The findings suggest that schools in the Philippines may benefit from implementing ARAL-aligned reading programs to improve students' numeracy and problem-solving skills. However, it is important to carefully consider the specific needs of the students and the context of the school when selecting and implementing these programs. Future research should focus on identifying the key components of effective ARAL-aligned programs and developing strategies to address the challenges of implementation.

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