

Navigating Educational Policy in Practice: Lived Experiences of ARAL Tutors in Selected Schools of Northern Samar

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Abstract—This study explored the lived experiences of ARAL Tutors in selected schools of Laoang, Gamay, and Capul, Northern Samar, focusing on how educational policies and governance structures shaped their work and identifying implications for program improvement. Employing a descriptive phenomenological design guided by Colaizzi's method, nine ARAL Tutors participated in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed emergent themes: pathways to becoming tutors, core responsibilities, tutoring practices, challenges encountered, memorable experiences, governance and policy support, policy-practice gaps, professional growth, and lessons for policymakers. Tutors reported that while they employed interactive, learner-centered strategies, their work was constrained by resource scarcity, irregular attendance tutees, heavy workloads, and administrative burdens. Despite these challenges, they experienced transformative learner progress and professional growth in patience, empathy, and differentiated instruction. Findings underscore Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, as tutors exercised discretion in adapting policies to rural realities, and highlight the importance of distributed leadership (Cheng, 2024; Montecillo, Escarlos, & De Los Santos, 2025) in sustaining ARAL implementation. Policy-practice gaps were evident, as national directives assumed ideal conditions are absent in some municipalities of Northern Samar, including adequate ICT access, parental support, and learner safety. This study concludes that standardized policies are ineffective in rural contexts. Recommendations include contextualizing ARAL policies to local realities, reducing administrative burdens, providing adequate resources and tutor incentives, and strengthening community engagement. By situating tutors' narratives within theoretical frameworks of policy implementation and distributed leadership, this research contributes to evidence-based policy critique and offers actionable recommendations for strengthening educational recovery programs in marginalized settings.

Index Terms—Educational Policy, Aral Program, Tutors, Lived Experiences.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created noticeable disruptions in education systems worldwide, resulting in significant learning losses across literacy, numeracy, and foundational skills. In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) responded to this problem through the National Learning Recovery Program

(NLRP), institutionalized under Republic Act No. 12028 (DepEd, 2024), with the ARAL (Academic Recovery and Acceleration Learning) initiative as its flagship intervention. ARAL Tutors serve as frontline implementers of this policy, tasked with bridging learning gaps and supporting learners' academic recovery.

Despite its ambitious scope, ARAL implementation has faced persistent challenges. Studies highlight issues such as delayed resource distribution, compliance driven monitoring, and limited incentives for tutors, which often undermine program sustainability (Jove, 2026). Moreover, disparities in ICT integration, instructional materials, and professional development exacerbate inequities in learner participation, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas like Northern Samar (Prosia, Velasco, & Escarlos, 2025). These realities reveal the tension between policy design and ground level practice, where tutors and school heads must adapt directives to local contexts with limited support.

Northern Samar presents a unique context for ARAL implementation. The rural and geographically isolated schools in this province face resource scarcity, infrastructural constraints, and socio-economic disparities that complicate the translation of national policies into practice (Tan, 2022). While DepEd provides guidelines for ARAL, the lived experiences of tutors reveal how policies are interpreted, adapted, and sometimes contested in local realities. This underscores Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, which explains how frontline workers exercise discretion in implementing policies under conditions of constraint.

Emerging scholarship underscores the role of transformational leadership and social constructivist approaches in bridging educational gaps. School heads and tutors who adopt collaborative, context-driven strategies foster stronger learner engagement, parental involvement, and peer-supported learning environments, thereby enhancing literacy and numeracy outcomes (Prosia et al., 2025). However, disparities in ICT integration, instructional materials, and professional development remain critical barriers, particularly in rural divisions where socio-economic constraints shape learner participation and attendance (Jove, 2026).

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Even in the researcher's workplace, in which she had once been an ARAL tutor, she experienced scarcity of learning materials, lack of service credits, and time constraints in preparing ARAL instructional materials. Also, during her informal conversations with other ARAL tutors, it was noted that although they support the program, some of the expectations that they have to it, are not what they are experiencing.

Drawing from these experiences and observations, the researcher was compelled to undertake this study to explore the lived experiences of ARAL Tutors in selected schools across Laoang, Gamay, and Capul, Northern Samar. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) document tutors' lived experiences in program implementation, (2) examine how educational policies and governance structures shape their work, and (3) identify policy and management implications for enhancing ARAL implementation. By situating tutors' narratives within theoretical frameworks of policy implementation and distributed leadership, this research advances evidence-based policy critique and offers practical recommendations for strengthening educational recovery initiatives in rural contexts.

2. Methods

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design guided by Colaizzi's method. Phenomenology was considered appropriate for exploring and understanding the lived experiences of ARAL Tutors, as it captures the essential meanings of a phenomenon from the perspective of those directly involved (Colaizzi, 1978). This approach enabled the researcher to document tutors' experiences in implementing the ARAL Program, highlighting their challenges, strategies, and reflections within the context of educational policy and school governance.

The research was conducted during Summer 2025–2026 in purposively selected schools from the municipalities of Laoang, Gamay, and Capul, Division of Northern Samar. These sites were chosen because of their active implementation of the ARAL Program, making them suitable contexts for examining tutors' lived experiences.

Participants included nine ARAL Tutors: eight were regular public elementary school teachers, while one was in the process of applying for permanent appointment. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all participants had direct involvement in ARAL Program implementation, thereby providing rich, first-hand insights into their experiences, challenges, and strategies.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face and online interviews. This format allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely while enabling the researcher to probe specific areas related to ARAL practices, stakeholder engagement, decision-making processes, and school improvement initiatives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness., challenges, and strategies in leading school governance and improvement initiatives.

Data analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step process, which include: familiarization with the transcripts, identification of

significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of an exhaustive description, construction of the fundamental structure and validation of findings with participants.

This rigorous process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' narratives resulting in a comprehensive understanding of ARAL Program implementation in the selected municipalities.

3. Results

A. Profile of the Respondents

Table 1
Profile of the respondents

Code Name	Age	Gender	Educational Attainment	Years of Teaching	Tutoring Experience
Tut 1	38	Female	AB LLT+ MAEd CAR	14	5
Tut 2	40	Male	BEEEd	18	7
Tut 3	41	Female	BEEEd-HE/MAEd CAR	19	7
Tut 4	43	Female	BEEEd + MED CAR	21	9
Tut 5	40	Female	BEEEd+ Masters Degree	15	6
Tut 6	28	Male	BEEEd	4	4
Tut 7	36	Female	BEEEd +MAEd CAR	13	5
TUT 8	41	Female	BEEEd+Masters Degree	20	8
TUT 9	33	Female	BEEEd+ MAEd CAR	7	6

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the nine ARAL tutors from the selected schools in the municipalities of Laoang, Gamay and Capul, Northern Samar. The tutors range in ages from 28 to 43 years old, with the majority in their late 30s to early 40s. This indicates that most participants were in the mid-career stage of teaching, combining maturity with professional experience. In terms of gender distribution, seven were female and two were male, reflecting the broader trend of female predominance in the teaching profession, particularly in elementary education. All tutors possessed at least a Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEEd) degree, with several pursuing or completing graduate studies such as Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) or Master of Education (MEd). This demonstrates a strong commitment to professional growth and continuous learning, aligning with the ARAL's program emphasis on instructional competence and pedagogical innovation. Participants had between 4 and 9 tutoring experience, with most having more than a decade of service. This breadth of experience suggests that tutors brought both seasoned perspectives and fresh insights into ARAL implementation. The presence of one tutor still applying for permanent appointment highlights the inclusivity of the program, engaging both regular and aspiring teachers. The tutors were assigned across various schools in the Laoang I, II III, and V Districts, Gamay District, and Capul District, ensuring representation from different local contexts. This distribution provided a multi-site perspective on ARAL implementation, capturing variations in governance structures, resource availability, and community engagement.

B. Thematic Analysis of ARAL Tutor's Lived Experiences

Table 2 shows the Thematic Analysis of the ARAL Tutor's Lived Experiences. The themes were group into eleven with the corresponding clustered insights and illustrative quotes.

1) Pathways into Tutoring

Tutors entered the program through varied routes—formal designation by school heads, selection based on professional

roles, or personal commitment to help learners post-pandemic. This diversity underscores the blend of institutional assignment and intrinsic motivation driving participation. As one tutor shared, “I became an ARAL Tutor because I wanted to help learners who were struggling in reading and comprehension after the pandemic.” (Tut 1).

Table 2
Thematic analysis of ARAL tutor’s lived experiences

Theme	Clustered Insights	Illustrative Quotes
Pathways to Becoming ARAL Tutors	Tutors were designated by school heads, selected based on roles (Reading Coordinator, Master Teacher), or motivated by personal passion to help learners post-pandemic.	“I became an ARAL Tutor because I wanted to help learners who were struggling in reading and comprehension after the pandemic.” (Tut 1)
Core Responsibilities	Conducting remedial sessions, preparing materials, monitoring progress, coordinating with parents/school heads, submitting reports, and handling diagnostic tests/orientations.	“My main responsibilities include conducting tutorial sessions, preparing learning materials, monitoring learners’ progress, and coordinating with teachers and school heads.” (Tut 1)
Tutoring Practices	Sessions held after class hours or during summer programs. Strategies included guided reading, games, worksheets, small-group activities. Duration ranged from 30 minutes to 4 hours.	“I usually begin my tutoring sessions with a short review... using interactive strategies such as group work, games, reading activities.” (Tut 1)
Challenges Encountered	Scarcity of materials, irregular attendance, overlapping duties, heavy workloads, and environmental distractions.	“One of the major challenges is the lack of learning materials and resources. Some learners also have poor attendance because of family responsibilities.” (Tut 1)
Memorable Experiences	Learners progressed from non-readers to confident readers. Tutors emphasized patience, emotional resilience, and transformative impact.	“One memorable experience was when a learner who could barely read... gradually improved and became confident in reading aloud.” (Tut 1)
Governance & Policy Support	School leaders provided orientations, monitoring, and scheduling support. Hindrances included delayed resources, lack of funding, and paperwork.	“School leaders support us by providing orientations... However, delayed resources and additional paperwork make our work more difficult.” (Tut 1)
DepEd Policy Effects	Policies offered structure and accountability but were rigid, unclear, and burdensome, adding workload without incentives.	“DepEd policies and guidelines help provide direction... However, some policies can be difficult to implement because of limited resources.” (Tut 1)
Policy–Practice Gaps	Misalignment between policy design and rural realities: lack of resources, parental support, ICT access, and learner safety concerns.	“The policy assumes ideal conditions... In reality, many of our learners walk long distances alone, so keeping them late poses safety risk.” (Tut 8)
Recommendations for Policymakers	Provision of contextualized resources, continuous training, incentives, reduced paperwork, consultation with teachers.	“I recommend providing more learning materials, training opportunities, and financial support for tutors.” (Tut 1)
Professional Growth	Enhanced patience, creativity, empathy, and differentiated instruction skills. Strengthened learner-centered approaches.	“Being an ARAL Tutor helped me improve my teaching strategies, communication skills, and patience in handling different types of learners.” (Tut 1)
Lessons for Policymakers	One-size-fits-all policies don’t work in rural contexts. Policymakers should listen to teachers, adapt interventions locally, and provide incentives.	“Policies crafted in urban centers do not seamlessly translate to rural divisions like Northern Samar.” (Tut 8)

2) Core Responsibilities and Practices

Tutors assumed multifaceted roles: conducting remedial sessions, preparing materials, monitoring progress, and coordinating with parents and school leaders. Sessions were often held after class hours or during summer programs, employing strategies such as guided reading, games, and small-group activities. These practices reflect a learner-centered approach that adapts to diverse needs, though they also extend tutors’ workloads significantly.

3) Challenges in Implementation

Despite their dedication, tutors faced persistent obstacles: scarcity of materials, irregular learner attendance, overlapping duties, and environmental distractions. These challenges highlight the resource and contextual constraints of rural education. One tutor noted, “One of the major challenges is the lack of learning materials and resources. Some learners also have poor attendance because of family responsibilities.” (Tut 1).

4) Memorable Experiences and Professional Growth

Tutors emphasized the emotional rewards of witnessing learners progress from non-readers to confident readers. These moments fostered patience, resilience, and empathy, contributing to tutors’ professional growth. “Being an ARAL

Tutor helped me improve my teaching strategies, communication skills, and patience in handling different types of learners.” (Tut 1). Such reflections illustrate the transformative impact of tutoring on both learners and educators.

5) Governance, Policy Effects, and Gaps

School leaders provided orientations and monitoring, yet systemic hindrances—delayed resources, lack of funding, and paperwork undermined efficiency. DepEd policies offered structure but were often rigid and burdensome, creating policy–practice gaps. As one tutor observed, “The policy assumes ideal conditions. In reality, many of our learners walk long distances alone, so keeping them late poses safety risk.” (Tut 8). This misalignment between policy design and rural realities underscores the need for contextualized interventions.

6) Recommendations and Lessons for Policymakers

Tutors advocated for more contextualized resources, continuous training, financial incentives, and reduced paperwork. They stressed that one-size-fits-all policies fail in rural contexts, urging policymakers to consult teachers and adapt interventions locally. “Policies crafted in urban centers do not seamlessly translate to rural divisions like Northern Samar.” (Tut 8).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex realities of ARAL Tutors in Laoang, Gamay, and Capul, Northern Samar, revealing both the strengths of the program and the systemic challenges of its implementation in rural contexts.

A. Pathways into Tutorship and Professional Identity

Tutors’ entry into the ARAL Program was largely shaped by top-down designation from school heads or role-based selection (e.g., Reading Coordinators, Master Teachers). While this reflects the administrative nature of program deployment, several tutors also expressed personal motivation to help learners recover from pandemic-related learning gaps, underscoring the intrinsic commitment of teachers to literacy development. This dual pathway policy-driven assignment and personal passion illustrates how educational reforms intersect with teachers’ professional identities.

B. Responsibilities and Practices

Tutors’ responsibilities extended beyond remedial instruction to include diagnostic testing, parent orientations, monitoring, and reporting, reflecting the administrative burden attached to the role. Their tutoring practices emphasized interactive, learner-centered strategies such as games, guided reading, and small-group activities, consistent with DepEd’s emphasis on inclusive pedagogy. However, the reliance on after-class hours and summer sessions highlights the additional workload tutors must balance alongside regular teaching duties.

C. Challenges in Implementation

Persistent challenges emerged across sites, including scarcity of learning materials, irregular attendance, heavy workloads, and environmental distractions. These findings resonate with studies on rural education in the Philippines which emphasize

resource constraints and socio-economic barriers as critical impediments to program success. The tutors' accounts of learners arriving tired, hungry, or absent due to family responsibilities reflect the broader intersection of poverty and education suggesting that ARAL implementation cannot be divorced from community realities.

D. Transformative Experiences and Professional Growth

Despite these constraints, tutors shared memorable experiences of learner progress, from non-readers becoming confident readers to pupils overcoming anxiety in literacy tasks. These narratives affirm the transformative potential of ARAL when sustained support is provided. Professionally, tutors reported growth in patience, empathy, creativity, and differentiated instruction, aligning with the literature that highlights tutoring as a pathway for teacher development and reflective practice.

E. Governance and Policy Influence

Governance structures provided orientations and monitoring, but tutors noted delayed resources, lack of funding, and excessive paperwork as hindrances. While DepEd policies offered structure and accountability, they were often perceived as rigid and misaligned with rural realities. For example, strict contact-hour requirements were seen as counterproductive for fatigued learners, and ICT-based mandates were impractical in areas with poor connectivity. These findings underscore the policy–practice gap, where national directives assume ideal conditions that are absent in rural divisions.

F. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Tutors recommended provision of adequate and contextualized resources, incentives, reduced paperwork, and continuous training, alongside stronger consultation with teachers. Their emphasis on localized materials (e.g., in Waray) and flexible scheduling reflects the need for context-sensitive policy design. Importantly, tutors stressed that “one-size-fits-all” policies do not work in rural contexts, echoing broader critiques of centralized educational reforms in the Philippines.

G. Lessons for Policymakers

The experiences of ARAL Tutors highlight that effective policy implementation requires listening to teachers on the ground, adapting interventions to local realities, and addressing systemic inequities such as poverty, infrastructure gaps, and teacher workload. Without these considerations, well-intentioned programs risk being undermined by the very conditions they seek to address.

5. Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of ARAL Tutors in selected schools of Laoang, Gamay, and Capul, Northern Samar, within the framework of educational policy implementation. The findings revealed that tutors entered the program primarily through top-down designation by school heads or role-based selection, yet many also expressed personal motivation to support learners' recovery from pandemic-related learning gaps. Their responsibilities extended beyond remedial

instruction to include diagnostic testing, parent orientations, monitoring, and reporting, reflecting the dual instructional and administrative burden of the role.

Tutors employed interactive, learner-centered practices but faced persistent challenges such as scarcity of resources, irregular attendance, heavy workloads, and environmental distractions. Despite these constraints, they reported transformative experiences of learner progress and professional growth in patience, empathy, and differentiated instruction. These findings affirm the phenomenological emphasis on lived experience as a lens to understand how policies are translated into practice.

Governance and policy support was mixed: while orientations and monitoring were provided, tutors consistently noted delayed resources, excessive paperwork, and rigid guidelines. This reflects Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, where frontline implementers adapt policies to local realities, often negotiating between directives and constraints. The study also confirmed the existence of policy–practice gaps, as national policies assumed ideal conditions absent in rural divisions—such as adequate ICT access, parental support, and learner safety.

Overall, the findings underscore that “one-size-fits-all” policies are ineffective in rural contexts

Effective educational recovery requires context-sensitive interventions, distributed leadership, and genuine consultation with teachers. Without these, well-intentioned reforms risk being undermined by systemic inequities such as poverty, infrastructure gaps, and teacher workload.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and grounded in policy implementation theory and distributed leadership frameworks, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Contextualize ARAL policies to reflect rural realities, including flexible scheduling, localized materials (e.g., Waray translations), and recognition of socio-economic barriers.
2. Reduce administrative burdens by streamlining paperwork and reporting requirements, allowing tutors to focus on instruction.
3. Institutionalize distributed leadership (Cheng, 2024; Montecillo et al., 2025), ensuring that school heads, tutors, parents, and local government units share responsibility for program sustainability.
4. Allocate adequate and timely resources, including printed modules, ICT support, and dedicated tutoring spaces.
5. Provide financial incentives, service credits, or workload recognition for tutors, addressing morale and sustainability concerns.
6. Introduce nutritional support (e.g., snacks during sessions) to improve learner participation and focus, especially in resource-constrained communities.
7. Conduct continuous training and peer-sharing sessions to strengthen tutors' pedagogical strategies and resilience.

8. Integrate phenomenological reflection practices into training, enabling tutors to critically analyze their lived experiences and adapt strategies accordingly.
9. Recognize tutoring as a pathway for teacher professional growth, embedding it into career development frameworks.
10. Strengthen parental and community involvement through orientations, home-based support strategies, and local partnerships.
11. Encourage local government units to co-invest in ARAL implementation, bridging gaps in resources and infrastructure.
12. Foster collaborative monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that feedback from tutors informs policy adjustments.

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