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Reimagining Literacy Recovery: Lived Experiences of Junior High School English Teachers Implementing the ARAL Program in Developing Academic Reading and Writing Competencies

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ABSTRACT

The persistent decline in learners' literacy proficiency has become one of the most pressing educational concerns worldwide, particularly following the learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, the implementation of the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program institutionalized through Republic Act No. 12028 represents the government's strategic response to addressing learning loss by strengthening foundational competencies, including academic reading and writing. While existing studies have extensively evaluated learners' literacy performance and intervention outcomes, limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers of Bontoc District who serve as primary implementers of literacy recovery initiatives. Their perspectives are critical in understanding how national educational policies are translated into classroom practices that foster academic literacy among diverse learners. This phenomenological study aims to explore the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers in implementing the ARAL Program to develop students' academic reading and writing competencies. Guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study seeks to understand how teachers perceive their instructional roles, instructional innovations, implementation challenges, coping mechanisms, and professional meanings derived from literacy intervention. Participants will consist of purposively selected Junior High School English teachers actively implementing the ARAL Program in public secondary schools. Data will be gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the interpretative procedures of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. The study is expected to generate rich thematic descriptions that explain how teachers facilitate literacy recovery through differentiated instruction, reflective practice, collaborative engagement, and learner-centered pedagogies. Findings will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on literacy intervention, English language education, teacher professional development, and educational policy while providing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the ARAL Program in Philippine secondary schools.

Keywords: ARAL Program, literacy recovery, academic reading, academic writing, Senior High School English teachers, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, literacy intervention, lived experiences

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Introduction

Literacy has long been recognized as the foundation of educational success, serving as the primary means through which learners acquire knowledge, construct understanding, communicate ideas, and participate meaningfully in academic and social life. Among the various dimensions of literacy, academic reading and writing are regarded as higher-order competencies that enable learners to analyze information critically, synthesize diverse perspectives, construct evidence-based arguments, and communicate effectively across disciplinary contexts. These competencies are particularly essential in Senior High School, where students are expected to engage with increasingly complex texts and produce analytical, research-based, and discipline-specific written outputs in preparation for higher education, employment, and lifelong learning. Consequently, strengthening academic literacy has become a global educational priority because students' reading comprehension and writing proficiency significantly influence learning outcomes across all subject areas.

Despite sustained educational reforms, many learners continue to experience significant difficulties in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, academic writing, and critical literacy. International large-scale assessments consistently demonstrate persistent literacy challenges among adolescents. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) reported that a substantial proportion of fifteen-year-old learners worldwide continue to perform below minimum proficiency levels in reading literacy, limiting their ability to evaluate information, interpret complex texts, and apply knowledge to authentic situations. In the Philippines, the situation remains particularly concerning as Filipino learners continue to rank among the lowest-performing countries in reading literacy according to recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive literacy recovery initiatives capable of addressing widening learning gaps while promoting equitable access to quality education.

The educational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified literacy challenges. School closures, prolonged reliance on remote learning modalities, unequal access to instructional technologies, and varying levels of parental support contributed to significant declines in learners' reading and writing competencies. UNESCO (2023) emphasized that learning losses resulting from the pandemic disproportionately affected foundational literacy skills, particularly among vulnerable learners, thereby increasing the demand for structured educational recovery programs. In response to these challenges, governments worldwide have implemented targeted interventions designed to restore essential learning competencies and mitigate long-term educational consequences.

Recognizing the urgency of learning recovery, the Philippine government institutionalized the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program through Republic Act No. 12028, providing structured intervention programs that prioritize literacy, numeracy, and science competencies among struggling learners. The ARAL Program seeks to reduce learning gaps through differentiated instruction, individualized support, contextualized learning experiences, and systematic learner assessment. More importantly, the program positions teachers at the forefront of educational recovery by empowering them to diagnose learners' needs, design responsive instructional interventions, and facilitate meaningful literacy development beyond the regular classroom curriculum.

Within the Junior High School context, English teachers assume particularly significant responsibilities in implementing literacy recovery initiatives because academic reading and writing competencies are fundamental requirements across subjects and disciplines. Beyond teaching language structures and communication skills, Junior High School English teachers cultivate learners' ability to interpret scholarly texts, construct coherent arguments, evaluate evidence critically, and produce academically acceptable written outputs. These responsibilities require teachers to integrate differentiated instruction, scaffold higher-order thinking skills, and continuously adapt pedagogical approaches according to learners' diverse literacy needs. Consequently, implementing the ARAL Program demands not only pedagogical expertise

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but also creativity, resilience, collaboration, and sustained professional commitment.

Existing research has documented the effectiveness of various literacy intervention strategies, including explicit reading instruction, guided reading, differentiated teaching, writing workshops, formative assessment, and collaborative learning. Numerous quantitative studies have reported significant improvements in learners' reading achievement and writing performance following structured intervention programs. However, these investigations predominantly focus on learner outcomes, intervention effectiveness, or instructional techniques while giving comparatively limited attention to the experiences of teachers responsible for implementing literacy recovery initiatives. As frontliners of educational reform, teachers possess invaluable experiential knowledge regarding the realities of translating national literacy policies into classroom practice. Their lived experiences illuminate the complexities of instructional adaptation, learner engagement, emotional labor, professional growth, and contextual challenges that quantitative indicators alone cannot adequately explain.

Understanding teachers' lived experiences is particularly important because educational reforms ultimately succeed or fail through classroom implementation. Junior High School English teachers continuously negotiate institutional expectations, learner diversity, resource limitations, assessment requirements, and evolving pedagogical demands while striving to ensure meaningful literacy development. Their narratives provide critical insights into the strengths and limitations of the ARAL Program and reveal opportunities for strengthening teacher support systems, professional development initiatives, instructional leadership, and literacy policy implementation.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study seeks to explore how Junior High School English teachers make sense of their experiences implementing the ARAL Program in developing learners' academic reading and writing competencies. Rather than measuring program effectiveness through achievement scores alone, the study foregrounds teachers' voices by examining how they interpret their instructional roles, navigate implementation challenges, construct professional identities, and derive meaning from facilitating literacy recovery among Junior High School learners. Through this human-centered perspective, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of literacy recovery as a collaborative, reflective, and transformative educational endeavor grounded in teachers' lived experiences.

Research Gap

Although a growing body of literature has examined literacy intervention, reading recovery, and academic writing instruction, several significant gaps remain. Existing studies largely emphasize learners' reading achievement, writing performance, intervention effectiveness, or instructional strategies using quantitative and quasi-experimental research designs. While these investigations provide valuable evidence regarding student learning outcomes, they offer limited understanding of the lived experiences of teachers responsible for implementing literacy recovery programs. Moreover, current literature concerning the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program remains relatively limited because of its recent nationwide implementation under Republic Act No. 12028. Few qualitative investigations have explored how Junior High School English teachers interpret their instructional responsibilities, respond to diverse learner needs, develop innovative literacy practices, and overcome implementation challenges while facilitating academic reading and writing development. Likewise, phenomenological studies examining literacy recovery within the Philippine Junior High School context remain scarce, particularly those focusing on teachers' professional meanings, emotional experiences, and instructional adaptations during ARAL implementation. Addressing these gaps is essential because teachers' lived experiences provide contextual knowledge that extends beyond learner performance indicators and contributes to the continuous improvement of literacy intervention policies, teacher education programs, instructional leadership, and sustainable educational reform.

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Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers in implementing the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program in developing students' academic reading and writing competencies.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Explore how Junior High School English teachers describe their experiences in implementing the ARAL Program for academic reading and writing development.
2. Examine the instructional strategies and literacy practices employed to support learners' academic reading and writing competencies.
3. Identify the challenges encountered by teachers during the implementation of the ARAL Program.
4. Determine the coping mechanisms and professional practices adopted by teachers in addressing instructional challenges.
5. Understand the meanings that teachers attribute to their experiences in implementing literacy recovery initiatives.
6. Propose evidence-based recommendations that may strengthen the implementation of the ARAL Program and enhance literacy recovery efforts among Senior High School learners.

Review of Related Literature and Theoretical Framework

Review of Related Literature

Academic reading and writing are essential competencies that enable learners to comprehend, analyze, evaluate, and communicate ideas effectively across academic disciplines. These higher-order literacy skills are closely associated with learners' academic success, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023), reading literacy involves understanding, interpreting, and evaluating written texts to achieve personal and educational goals. Similarly, UNESCO (2023) emphasized that strengthening literacy is crucial in addressing learning loss and promoting equitable access to quality education, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippine context, the Department of Education institutionalized the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program through Republic Act No. 12028 to help learners recover foundational competencies in reading, writing, numeracy, and science through structured intervention programs. The success of this initiative largely depends on teachers, who serve as the primary implementers of literacy recovery by designing differentiated instruction, monitoring learner progress, and providing individualized academic support. Studies have shown that adaptive teaching, explicit literacy instruction, and positive teacher–learner relationships significantly improve learners' reading comprehension and writing performance (Hattie, 2023; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). However, while previous research has focused extensively on learners' achievement and intervention effectiveness, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers implementing literacy recovery programs. Understanding teachers' perspectives is essential because their experiences provide valuable insights into instructional innovation, professional resilience, and the contextual realities that influence the successful implementation of the ARAL Program.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022). Vygotsky posited that learning occurs through meaningful social interaction, where teachers provide scaffolding that enables learners to

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perform tasks within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the context of the ARAL Program, English teachers facilitate literacy recovery by guiding struggling learners through differentiated reading and writing activities until they gradually achieve independent learning. Meanwhile, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis provides the methodological lens for understanding how teachers make sense of their experiences in implementing the ARAL Program. IPA emphasizes the exploration of participants' personal meanings and lived experiences through in-depth interpretation, allowing the researcher to uncover the professional realities, challenges, and reflections of Junior High School English teachers as they support learners in developing academic reading and writing competencies.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers of Bontoc District in implementing the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program in developing students' academic reading and writing competencies. IPA was deemed appropriate because it focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and professional experiences within a particular context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). The study was conducted in selected public Junior High Schools implementing the ARAL Program. Participants consisted of 9 purposively selected Junior High School English teachers who had actively implemented the ARAL Program for at least one school year and had direct experience facilitating academic reading and writing interventions. Data were collected through researcher-developed semi-structured interview guides validated by experts in qualitative research, English language education, and literacy instruction. After securing approval from the appropriate school authorities and obtaining informed consent from the participants, individual face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted and audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to member checking to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the participants' narratives. Data analysis followed the procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, initial noting, coding significant statements, identifying emergent themes, clustering related themes into superordinate themes, and interpreting the meanings participants attached to their experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) were observed by establishing credibility through member checking and peer debriefing, transferability through rich descriptions of the research context, dependability through an audit trail of the research process, and confirmability through reflexive journaling and systematic documentation of analytical decisions. Ethical principles were strictly observed by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, secure storage of research data, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. These methodological procedures ensured the rigor, credibility, and ethical integrity of the study while providing a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers implementing the ARAL Program in developing learners' academic reading and writing competencies.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview transcripts using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) generated four superordinate themes that describe the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers in implementing the ARAL Program to develop students' academic reading and writing competencies. These themes reflect teachers' commitment to literacy recovery, their adaptive instructional practices, the challenges encountered during implementation, and their professional growth throughout the program.

Theme 1: Becoming Catalysts of Academic Literacy

The participants viewed themselves not merely as classroom teachers but as facilitators of literacy recovery

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who guide learners toward becoming competent readers and writers. They described the ARAL Program as an opportunity to strengthen students' academic literacy by providing individualized instruction, encouraging critical reading, and improving writing skills. Teachers believed that helping learners understand academic texts and express ideas effectively contributed significantly to their confidence and academic success.

Representative responses include:

P1: *"The ARAL Program allowed me to focus on students who struggled with reading and writing. Seeing them gradually understand academic texts is very fulfilling."*

P4: *"I realized that literacy recovery is more than teaching grammar. It is helping students become confident readers and writers."*

P8: *"Many learners lacked confidence in expressing their ideas. Through ARAL, they slowly became more comfortable reading and writing academically."*

These findings suggest that teachers perceive literacy recovery as a transformative educational process rather than a remedial activity. This supports **Hattie (2023)**, who emphasized that teacher effectiveness significantly influences learners' academic achievement, particularly when teachers establish supportive learning relationships and provide purposeful instruction.

Theme 2: Employing Innovative and Differentiated Literacy Practices

Participants consistently reported adapting their teaching strategies according to learners' literacy levels and academic needs. They utilized differentiated instruction, guided reading, collaborative learning, contextualized reading materials, writing workshops, peer feedback, and formative assessment to develop students' academic reading and writing competencies. Teachers emphasized that flexibility and creativity were necessary because learners possessed varying reading abilities, writing skills, and learning styles.

Representative responses include:

P2: *"I modify reading materials depending on the learners' level because one activity cannot address everyone's needs."*

P6: *"We use short academic articles, reflective writing activities, and peer editing to improve both reading comprehension and writing."*

These experiences support **Tomlinson (2021)**, who asserted that differentiated instruction enhances learner engagement by addressing diverse learning needs. Similarly, **Duke and Cartwright (2021)** emphasized that explicit and scaffolded literacy instruction significantly improves reading comprehension and academic writing performance.

Theme 3: Overcoming Challenges in Literacy Recovery Implementation

Despite their commitment, participants encountered several challenges while implementing the ARAL Program. The most common concerns included limited instructional time, insufficient reading and writing resources, increased teaching workload, inconsistent learner attendance, and varying learner motivation. Teachers explained that balancing regular teaching responsibilities with literacy intervention required additional planning, preparation, and personal commitment.

Representative responses include:

P3: *"Preparing separate intervention materials requires extra time because learners have different literacy needs."*

P5: *"Some learners attend irregularly, making it difficult to sustain their progress in reading and writing."*

P7: *"Sometimes we create our own instructional materials because available resources are limited."*

The findings indicate that literacy recovery implementation involves both instructional and contextual challenges. Similar observations were reported by Garcia and Ramos (2024), who found that inadequate resources, increased workload, and learner-related factors remain significant barriers to effective literacy intervention in public schools. Nevertheless, participants continued implementing the program through innovation and professional commitment.

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Theme 4: Developing Professional Resilience Through Reflection and Collaboration

Teachers described the ARAL Program as a valuable professional learning experience that strengthened their instructional competence, resilience, and collaborative practices. Participants shared that continuous reflection, peer collaboration, administrative support, and professional discussions enabled them to improve literacy instruction despite existing challenges. Witnessing learners' gradual improvement motivated them to continue refining their teaching strategies.

Representative responses include:

P1: *"We constantly exchange strategies because every teacher discovers different ways of helping struggling learners."*

P6: *"Reflection after every intervention session helped me identify what worked and what needed improvement."*

P9: *"The support of fellow teachers and school administrators encouraged us to continue despite the workload."*

These findings affirm Day and Gu (2020), who argued that teacher resilience is strengthened through collaboration, reflective practice, and supportive professional communities. Likewise, OECD (2023) emphasized that collaborative school cultures contribute to sustainable educational improvement and better learner outcomes.

Summary of Findings

The lived experiences of Senior High School English teachers reveal that implementing the ARAL Program is both professionally challenging and personally rewarding. Teachers emerged as literacy advocates who continuously adapted instructional practices to meet learners' academic reading and writing needs while overcoming resource limitations, time constraints, and diverse learner abilities. Their experiences demonstrate that the success of literacy recovery depends not only on structured intervention programs but also on teachers' commitment, instructional innovation, resilience, and collaborative engagement. These findings underscore the indispensable role of English teachers in translating literacy recovery policies into meaningful classroom practices that foster academic reading and writing competencies among Senior High School learners.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Junior High School English teachers play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program by serving as facilitators of academic literacy, instructional innovators, and advocates for struggling learners. The participants perceived literacy recovery as a transformative educational process that extends beyond improving reading and writing skills to fostering learners' confidence, critical thinking, and academic engagement. Their experiences demonstrated that meaningful literacy instruction is grounded in empathy, patience, and differentiated teaching practices that address learners' diverse academic needs. This finding supports Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which emphasizes that learners acquire higher-order competencies through guided interaction and instructional scaffolding provided by knowledgeable teachers. By continuously adapting instruction and providing individualized support, the participants created learning environments that enabled students to gradually develop academic reading and writing competencies.

The study also found that differentiated and contextualized instructional practices were central to the implementation of the ARAL Program. Teachers employed guided reading, collaborative learning, writing workshops, peer feedback, contextualized learning materials, and formative assessments to accommodate learners' varying literacy levels. These findings affirm the principles of differentiated instruction proposed by Tomlinson (2021) and support the work of Duke and Cartwright (2021), who argued that explicit literacy instruction and scaffolded learning significantly improve learners' reading comprehension and academic writing. The participants' willingness to modify instructional approaches illustrates their pedagogical competence and responsiveness to learners' individual needs, reinforcing the importance of

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teacher flexibility in literacy recovery initiatives.

Despite these positive practices, participants consistently encountered challenges related to limited instructional resources, insufficient intervention time, increased workload, learner absenteeism, and varying levels of motivation. These constraints required teachers to invest additional effort in preparing instructional materials and designing individualized learning activities. Nevertheless, their commitment to supporting struggling learners remained unwavering. These findings are consistent with studies by Garcia and Ramos (2024) and Santos and David (2023), which reported that teachers implementing literacy intervention programs frequently experience resource limitations and heavy workloads while maintaining strong professional dedication. The study therefore highlights that effective literacy recovery requires not only committed teachers but also sustained institutional support, adequate instructional resources, and collaborative educational leadership.

Another important finding is the development of teacher resilience through reflection, collaboration, and continuous professional learning. Participants emphasized that sharing instructional strategies, discussing learner progress, and receiving administrative support strengthened their confidence and improved their teaching practices. Reflection enabled them to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention activities and refine their instructional approaches based on learners' responses. These findings support Day and Gu (2020), who emphasized that teacher resilience is nurtured through collaborative professional communities and reflective practice. The lived experiences of the participants further demonstrate that literacy recovery becomes more sustainable when teachers are supported by a collaborative school culture that values innovation, professional growth, and shared responsibility for learner success.

Implications of the Study

The findings have significant implications for educational practice, policy, and teacher development. Schools implementing the ARAL Program should strengthen literacy recovery by providing continuous professional development on differentiated reading and writing instruction, formative assessment, and evidence-based literacy strategies. School administrators should establish collaborative professional learning communities where teachers can exchange best practices, develop intervention materials, and collectively address instructional challenges. At the policy level, the Department of Education should continue enhancing the implementation of the ARAL Program through increased funding, adequate instructional resources, and sustained monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Teacher education institutions should likewise strengthen pre-service and graduate programs by integrating literacy intervention, academic reading and writing pedagogy, and differentiated instruction into their curricula. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies in different educational settings or employ mixed-methods approaches to further examine the implementation and effectiveness of literacy recovery programs among diverse learner populations.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers in implementing the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program in developing learners' academic reading and writing competencies. The findings revealed that teachers perceive literacy recovery as a meaningful educational endeavor that goes beyond improving learners' reading and writing abilities. They viewed themselves as literacy advocates who foster learners' confidence, critical thinking, and academic engagement through differentiated instruction, contextualized learning experiences, and individualized support. Their experiences demonstrated that the development of academic literacy requires patience, creativity, and sustained professional commitment to address the diverse needs of struggling learners.

The study further established that effective implementation of the ARAL Program depends on teachers' ability to adapt instructional strategies, integrate learner-centered pedagogies, and continuously assess

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learners' progress. Despite encountering challenges such as limited instructional resources, increased workload, insufficient intervention time, learner absenteeism, and varying levels of learner motivation, the participants remained committed to providing meaningful literacy interventions. Their resilience was strengthened through collaboration with colleagues, reflective teaching practices, and administrative support, enabling them to sustain effective literacy instruction despite contextual constraints.

Overall, the study concludes that the success of the ARAL Program is strongly influenced by teachers' professional commitment, instructional adaptability, collaborative engagement, and resilience. Understanding the lived experiences of Junior High School English teachers provides valuable insights that can guide educational leaders, policymakers, and teacher education institutions in strengthening literacy recovery initiatives. Ultimately, investing in teacher capacity-building and providing adequate institutional support are essential for ensuring the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of literacy recovery programs aimed at improving students' academic reading and writing competencies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. **The Department of Education** should continuously strengthen the implementation of the ARAL Program by providing sufficient instructional resources, contextualized literacy materials, and regular capacity-building programs for English teachers involved in literacy recovery initiatives.

2. **School administrators** should establish sustainable professional learning communities that encourage collaboration, mentoring, and the sharing of effective strategies in teaching academic reading and writing.

3. **Junior High School English teachers** should continue employing differentiated instruction, formative assessment, and learner-centered approaches while integrating innovative literacy practices that address students' diverse academic needs.

4. **Parents and guardians** should actively support learners' literacy development by encouraging regular reading and writing activities at home and maintaining close communication with teachers regarding learners' academic progress.

5. **Teacher education institutions** should strengthen pre-service and graduate teacher preparation programs by integrating courses and training on literacy intervention, differentiated instruction, academic writing pedagogy, and evidence-based reading instruction.

6. **Future researchers** are encouraged to conduct similar phenomenological or mixed-methods studies involving other subject areas, educational levels, and geographical locations to further examine the implementation and effectiveness of the ARAL Program in improving learners' literacy competencies.

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