

Learning Recovery Through Distributed Leadership: A Review on the Implementation of DepEd's Aral Program

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruptions in education, resulting in severe learning losses among Filipino learners, especially in foundational literacy and numeracy skills. In response, the Department of Education (DepEd) launched the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program to bridge learning gaps and accelerate academic recovery nationwide. However, the success of such a large-scale initiative depends on effective leadership and collaboration at all school levels. This review examines the implementation of the ARAL Program through the lens of Distributed Leadership Theory, which emphasizes shared responsibility, collective agency, and contextual adaptability among multiple actors—school heads, teacher-leaders, tutors, parents, and local government units (LGUs). Drawing on recent literature and policy reports, the paper argues that distributed leadership fosters stronger ownership, adaptability, and sustainability in learning recovery efforts. When leadership is shared and collaborative, ARAL becomes not only a remedial intervention but a community-driven movement that empowers schools to respond effectively to learners' diverse needs.

Keywords: distributed leadership, ARAL program, learning recovery, educational governance, DepEd Philippines, collaborative leadership, post-pandemic education

INTRODUCTION

The disruption of face-to-face schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic left deep learning gaps around the world, particularly in foundational skills in literacy and numeracy (World Bank et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, the Department of Education's ARAL Program was established by law under RA 12028, signed in 2024, to accelerate learning recovery and support learners who were falling behind (Department of Education, 2024). According to Republic Act No. 12028 (2024), among the ARAL Program's key goals are strengthening foundational competencies in reading, mathematics, and science; mobilizing well-chosen and trained tutors; and engaging communities through campaigns to encourage learners to return to school.

However, implementing large-scale recovery initiatives such as ARAL raises complex governance and leadership challenges: identifying who leads, how responsibilities are distributed, how stakeholders collaborate, and how local contexts are engaged (Republic Act No. 12028, 2024). Traditional leadership models often rely on a single head or centralized hierarchy, but this can limit the school's ability to respond and adapt. Scholars have argued that in complex, changing contexts (e.g., during a crisis), distributed leadership enables greater responsiveness, collective ownership, and adaptive capacity (Cheng, 2024).

In response, this review proposes to examine the implementation of the ARAL Program through the theoretical lens of Distributed Leadership Theory—namely, how leadership tasks and responsibilities are shared among multiple actors (school heads, teachers, tutors, communities, parents) to better support learning recovery. By doing so, we aim to highlight how distributed leadership practices can enhance the ARAL implementation, what conditions enable it, and what barriers remain.

Conceptual Foundation Of Distributed Leadership

Distributed Leadership Theory stems from the idea that leadership in schools is not solely centered on one individual but is best conceptualized as “a series of practices carried out by multiple actors” in dynamic interaction with context (Gómez-Hurtado et al., 2020). For example, in the middle-school classroom context,

distributed leadership has been shown to improve teaching effectiveness and school operation efficiency (Ling, Bai, Li, & Yang, 2023).

Key features of the distributed leadership framework include:

- a. Shared responsibility:** Leadership tasks are distributed across formal leaders (school heads, department chairs) and informal leaders (teacher-leaders, tutors, parents) (Antin & Dzulkifli, 2025).
- b. Collective agency:** Multiple actors engage in decision-making, problem-solving, and change processes, rather than simply executing top-down instructions (Costache, 2025).
- c. Interactional architecture:** Systems, routines, and structures support collaborative leadership practices and enable multiple actors to lead (Eriksson, Andersson Bäck, Elmersjö, et al., 2025).
- d. Contextual adaptation:** Leadership practices vary by school context, and the distribution of leadership tasks must reflect local needs and conditions (Eriksson, Andersson Bäck, Elmersjö, et al., 2025).

In empirical studies, distributed leadership has been associated with higher teacher empowerment, increased teacher autonomy, and stronger organizational commitment (Pineda et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, studies show growing awareness of distributed leadership practices among public elementary teachers.

Applying this conceptual foundation to the ARAL Program implies that recovery efforts are more likely to succeed if leadership is distributed: tutors, teacher-leaders, school heads, parents, LGUs and community volunteers collaborate, decision-making is shared, and multiple stakeholders contribute to implementation, monitoring and adaptation of the recovery interventions.

Given the theoretical foundations discussed above, it becomes essential to examine how these principles of shared leadership manifest within actual educational programs. The ARAL Program provides a relevant context for exploring the operationalization of distributed leadership, as its implementation involves various stakeholders—school heads, teachers, tutors, parents, LGUs, and community partners. The following section therefore connects the conceptual framework to concrete ARAL practices, highlighting both strengths and challenges.

Distributed Leadership And The Implementation Of The Aral Program

The ARAL Program requires broad mobilization of stakeholders to support learning recovery. Using distributed leadership as a lens, the implementation can be examined across several dimensions:

a. Shared responsibility and tutor mobilizations

In practice, ARAL relies heavily on tutors, teacher-leaders, school principals, and community volunteers who work together to implement tutorials and support struggling learners (Department of Education, 2024). This represents a clear distribution of leadership roles, as tutors and teacher-leaders are encouraged to participate in decision-making, provide feedback, and help refine the school's ARAL action plan.

Despite this intent, shared responsibility is sometimes limited by uneven tutor availability, inconsistent recruitment processes, and lack of clarity in role expectations. In many schools, the workload still tends to fall on a few teachers, reflecting lingering hierarchical patterns (Manila Bulletin, 2025).

b. Collaborative planning, monitoring and decision-making

To localize ARAL interventions, schools are encouraged to involve principal, teacher-leaders, tutors, and parents in reviewing diagnostic data and planning targeted sessions. This operationalizes distributed leadership by

enabling multiple actors to jointly identify learners' needs and co-design intervention strategies (Department of Education, 2024).

Collaboration is often hindered by logistical constraints such as lack of common meeting time, insufficient training on data interpretation, or weak communication channels between home, school, and LGUs. In some contexts, planning remains largely principal-driven rather than shared (de Jong, Meirink, & Admiraal, 2022).

c. Contextual adaptation and local agency

ARAL explicitly encourages LGUs, barangays, and parents' associations to support contextual adaptation. When leadership is distributed, these groups can help secure tutorial spaces, provide resources, or tailor session schedules according to community realities—particularly important in remote, rural, or crowded urban schools (Republic Act No. 12028, 2024).

Local government engagement varies widely. Some LGUs provide strong support, while others lack resources or prioritization. This uneven participation limits ARAL's ability to adapt interventions equitably across schools.

d. Capacity building and teacher-leader development

Distributed leadership in ARAL is operationalized when tutors and teacher-leaders receive ongoing training and mentoring, equipping them to assume leadership roles in implementing tutorials, monitoring learner progress, and guiding instructional adjustments (Guzman, 2025).

Tutor capacity is inconsistent due to varying levels of training, differing teaching backgrounds, and limited mentoring opportunities. Without adequate support, tutors may struggle to carry out leadership roles confidently or effectively.

e. Monitoring, feedback and adaptive leadership loops

ARAL requires regular monitoring of learner progress, tutor performance, and implementation challenges. When teacher-leaders and tutors help analyze data and recommend modifications, they enact adaptive, distributed leadership.

Feedback loops are often weakened by lack of monitoring tools, insufficient time for reflective sessions, or unclear mechanisms for reporting challenges to school leaders. As a result, program adjustments may be slow or incomplete.

The implementation patterns and challenges discussed above reveal that while ARAL incorporates many elements of distributed leadership, its success depends heavily on strengthening collaborative structures, local capacities, and shared decision-making. These insights inform the policy and practice implications discussed in the next section. (Department of Education, 2025).

Implications

Adopting a distributed leadership framework in the ARAL Program implementation carries necessary implications for the formulation of the policy, leadership practice and overall system design based on the guidelines posted by the Department of Education, Implementing Guidelines for the ARAL Program in Reading (DM 064, s. 2025):

Decentralized decision-making and foster local agency.

Schools and local should be given the authority to convene and adjust ARAL activities based on the needs of the learners. The role of the leadership should be shared with the persons involved within the locality such as the teacher-leader, tutors, parents and LGU's to build an ownership that is shared by everyone which makes the program more suited in the local context.

Develop teacher-leaders and tutors as co-leaders.

Providing ongoing professional development, mentoring, peer learning communities, and reflective practices. This means that it should invest in capacity building to transform tutors and teacher-leaders into active leadership roles.

Facilitate collaborative planning and participatory governance.

Planning teams and learning recovery task force should be establish in formal structures. This would lead to the collaborative decision making of the teacher-leader, tutors, parents, local government representatives and stakeholders in the community.

Design adaptive monitoring and feedback systems.

Local review teams should be establish composed of tutors, teacher-leaders to monitor learners progress, identify barriers, evaluate strategies and adjust the implementation as needed. This ensures that the feedback flows smoothly across levels.

Leverage community and stakeholder partnerships.

Distributed leadership extends beyond the school. There should be an integration of partnerships with barangays, parents, local organizations, and private stakeholders into ARAL implementation so that the recovery of learning becomes a shared community endeavor.

Align policy frameworks to support distributed leadership.

Acknowledgement of the distributed leadership models by the national and regional offices should be done, recognizing that the leadership extends beyond the school who shared the responsibilities. Additionally, accountability systems and trainings should be embodied by the model in promoting a collaborative leadership, establishing collective performance indicators, and rewarding the shared responsibility rather than focusing solely on the performance of the individual.

Strategic recommendations:

- Create a school-based ARAL leadership teams rather than sole coordinators.
- Define and illustrate clear roles and responsibilities for tutor-leaders, teacher-leaders, and community partners.
- Establish peer-led professional learning communities focused on ARAL strategies.
- Align local school plans with ARAL implementation plans, enabling adaptation based on local diagnostics.
- Acknowledge and reward collaborative leadership efforts (e.g., tutor-leader contributions, community mobilization).
- Review and revise monitoring frameworks to include local leadership and participatory decision-making indicators.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research about the distributed leadership demonstrates a positive relationship with teacher empowerment, development of the organization and the overall effectiveness of school. For example, the review of the theory in 2023 in the post-primary schools identified that there is empirical evidence that highlights the contribution of the collaborative practices, school culture cultivation and teacher agency enhancement.

Also, in Philippines-based research, awareness and practices of distributed leadership among elementary teachers are increasing, though challenges remain around culture, capacity and decision-making structures (Kadir, Kamarudin & Tao, 2025).

Applying these insights to ARAL, one may suggest that the distributing leadership responsibilities to the person involved such as the tutors, teacher-leaders, school principals and community stakeholders enhances its capacity and effectiveness. Moreover, it sustains interventions and broader range of participants. In contrast, highly centralized implementation with limited local leadership involvement may constrain opportunities for ownership, contextual adaptation, and long-term sustainability (Calderon, 2023).

Some potential barriers to distributed leadership in ARAL include:

- Limited training or capacity of tutor-leaders and teacher-leaders to assume leadership tasks.
- Cultural or institutional norms that continue to favor hierarchical, top-down leadership models.
- Inadequate structures for collaboration, planning and decision-making at the local school level.
- Insufficient resources or overworked staff reducing time for collaborative leadership practices.
- Ambiguity in roles, responsibilities and accountability among distributed leadership actors.
- Considering the scale and urgency of ARAL's aims, adopting a distributed leadership perspective offers a compelling framework for improving the program's effectiveness by reframing leadership not as a single person's job but as a multi-actor, collaborative Endeavor.

To overcome these challenges, ARAL Program should build leadership capacity by establishing a regular and professional cycle for tutors and teacher leaders. Calderon (2023) also mentioned that school principals should provide opportunities to teacher-leaders to develop and grow in their respective fields. This includes mentoring, training and time for collaborative learning. Also, a more distributed and sustainable leadership that does not solely rely on one individual. In practice, this means integrating leadership-skills workshops, peer mentoring sessions and scheduled collaborative planning meetings into ARAL sessions. The agenda includes ARAL roles, leadership tasks, planning syllabus to build trust among tutors, teacher-leaders and school administrators.

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