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Views and Challenges in ECARP Implementation in the Philippines: Implications for Practice

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined teachers' perspectives on the implementation of the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP) and related reading initiatives in two adjacent Philippine public school divisions. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with 34 elementary and secondary teachers in Baguio City and La Trinidad, Benguet. Thematic analysis revealed that teacher awareness of ECARP was largely nominal rather than functional: although 25 teachers (73.5%) recognized ECARP or related reading policies by name, only 11 (32.4%) demonstrated clear understanding of its objectives, assessment expectations, and operational procedures. Teachers reliably conflated ECARP with later or parallel initiatives such as Drop Everything and Read, Catch-up Fridays, and the 3Bs Initiative. Recurring implementation barriers included weak policy communication, limited ECARP-specific training, scarcity of validated and level-appropriate materials, leadership turnover, heavy reportorial workload, parental disengagement, and institutional pressure to produce cosmetically acceptable reading reports. Interpreted through top-down/bottom-up implementation theory, change management theory, social cognitive theory, and diffusion of innovations theory, the findings suggest that ECARP's persistent difficulties reflect not the absence of literacy policy but the weakness of implementation systems that should sustain teacher capacity, honest assessment, leadership continuity, and bottom-up feedback. The study concludes that improving ECARP requires accountability arrangements that reward accurate reading diagnosis as the basis for support rather than as a reputational threat. Implications include clearer implementation standards, validated reading materials, sustained professional development, protected remediation time, transparent reporting, and institutionalized teacher participation in policy review.

Keywords

Reading policy implementation, ECARP, teacher perspectives, literacy policy, Philippine basic education

Introduction

Background and research problem

The Philippines has long treated reading proficiency, particularly English reading proficiency, as a central aim of basic education. The Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP), institutionalized through Executive Order 210 (2003) and reinforced by a series of Department of Education (DepEd) issuances on book reading, promotion criteria, the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), the Early Language, Literacy and Numeracy program, the Hamon: Bawat Bata Bumabasa (3Bs) Initiative, and the End-of-School-Year Reading Program, was designed to ensure that learners acquire the foundational literacy skills needed for academic participation and social mobility. ECARP's premise is straightforward: learners cannot meaningfully access the curriculum if they cannot read at the level expected of their grade.

Despite more than two decades of layered reading policies, the literacy challenge has worsened on most national and international indicators. The 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked Filipino learners last among 79 participating systems in reading literacy, with roughly 80% failing to reach the minimum proficiency benchmark (OECD, 2019). The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics 2019 (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2020) found that 27% of Filipino Grade 5 pupils could not read by the metric's definition, and the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2022) reported a learning poverty rate of 90.9% as of June 2022, up from 69.5% in 2019. The persistence of struggling readers and non-readers in upper elementary and secondary classrooms suggests that the policy problem is no longer the absence of literacy initiatives. It is the uneven translation of those initiatives into classroom practice.

For this reason, a focused inquiry into implementation is more useful than an additional chronological listing of reading directives. The issue addressed in this study is how teachers understand ECARP, how they enact reading policies under actual school conditions, and what constraints prevent the policy from producing its intended classroom effects. Teachers occupy the point at which national policy, school administration, available resources, learner needs, and parental support converge. Their accounts reveal not only whether ECARP is known by name, but also whether it is functionally understood, supported, monitored, and adjusted in practice.

This study therefore frames ECARP as an implementation problem within the wider literacy crisis. It does not argue that ECARP alone explains Filipino learners' reading difficulties. Rather, it uses teachers' accounts to identify how a major reading policy is interpreted, adapted, weakened, or sustained in public school settings, and what these accounts imply for honest assessment, clearer guidance, stronger instructional support, and more responsive implementation systems.

Targeted review of related literature

Three strands of research are directly relevant to this inquiry. The first concerns the chronic gap between Philippine education reform and classroom transformation. Bautista, Bernardo, and Ocampo (2008) argued that reform initiatives often falter when institutional, political, and cultural conditions are not addressed, leaving structural constraints intact while activity proliferates. Lorente (2013) showed that Philippine language policy must be understood materially as well as symbolically, because access to linguistic resources is unevenly distributed. More recent studies (Idulog et al., 2023; Lucas et al., 2021; Orbeta & Paqueo, 2022) extend this critique to reading specifically, observing that policies have not produced

commensurate improvements in reading proficiency despite repeated revision. Notably, these studies recommend implementation reforms but stop short of explaining how implementation should be sustained at the school level — a gap the present study attempts to address.

The second strand concerns teacher preparation and instructional support. Studies on reading interventions consistently emphasize that policy issuance is insufficient: literacy programmes require trained teachers, validated materials, regular assessment, and coaching structures (Gallagher et al., 2023; Mangila & Adapon, 2020). UNESCO (2022) similarly identifies governance and teacher development as preconditions for educational transformation. These insights are especially important for ECARP, because teachers are expected to implement reading programmes while managing large classes, multiple administrative reports, and diverse learner profiles.

The third strand concerns the political economy of educational reporting. David, Albert, and Vizmanos (2019) document that Filipino public school teachers face mounting non-instructional workload, including documentation pressures that compete with instructional time. Although that literature does not yet systematically theorize reading-policy reporting, it suggests that what teachers report, and how, is shaped by what the system rewards. The present study contributes to this strand by examining how teachers describe pressures to revise reading reports and the implications for reading-policy fidelity.

Existing studies have not sufficiently explained how ECARP is understood by teacher-implementers or why reading policies continue to produce inconsistent effects after years of implementation. The present study addresses this gap by foregrounding teacher accounts of policy awareness, program enactment, implementation barriers, and improvement measures, and by attending to the structural conditions — particularly accountability incentives — that shape teacher behavior.

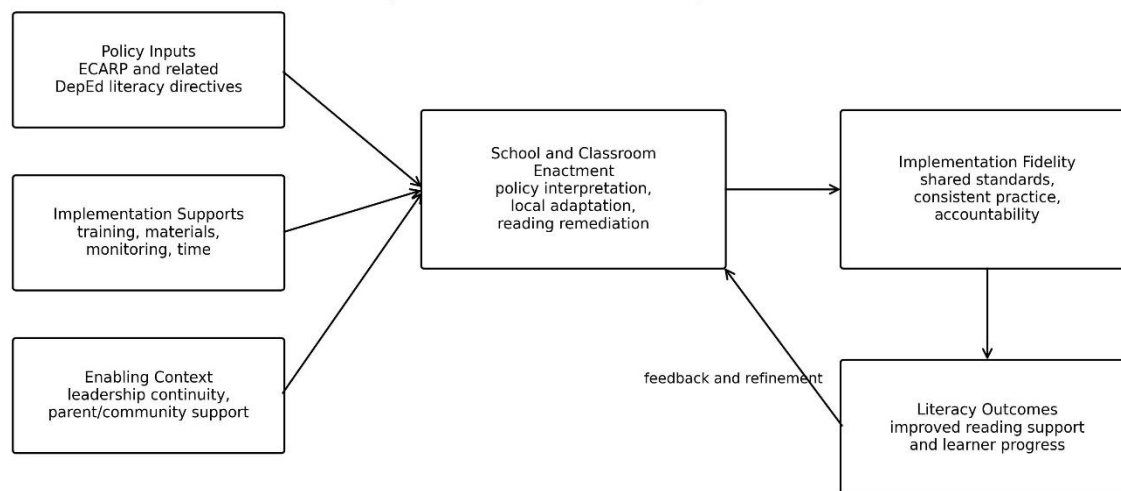
Conceptual and analytical framework

Four theoretical lenses inform this study and are used not as rigid coding categories but as sensitizing concepts that frame the research questions and guide interpretation. First, top-down/bottom-up implementation theory (Sabatier, 1986) explains the tension between centrally issued policy directives and the local realities of schools and classrooms. ECARP is formally a top-down policy, but its operational meaning is negotiated by teachers, principals, and divisions; effectiveness depends on how well bottom-up adaptation is acknowledged and fed back into refinement. Second, change management theory (Phillips & Klein, 2023) highlights communication, leadership continuity, stakeholder participation, and readiness as conditions for sustained reform. Third, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) emphasizes teacher self-efficacy, modelling, and the reciprocal influence of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors on reading instruction. Fourth, diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003) explains how policy ideas spread through communication channels, how teachers occupy different adopter categories, and why awareness by name does not always entail functional adoption.

Together, these lenses pose four analytical questions used in the analysis: How does central reading policy travel from issuance to classroom? What conditions enable or obstruct reading-policy change at the school level? How do training, materials, and supervision shape teacher confidence and instructional behavior? How do reading innovations diffuse, fragment, or lose meaning across schools? The framework treats ECARP implementation as the dynamic

interaction of policy inputs, implementation supports, school and classroom enactment, accountability incentives, and feedback loops for refinement.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of ECARP Implementation



Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

- How do teachers perceive the implementation of ECARP, including their level of awareness and understanding of its goals and strategies?
- What challenges do teachers face while implementing ECARP and related reading initiatives?
- Based on teacher experiences and insights, what specific measures can improve ECARP implementation and support more effective literacy outcomes?

Methodology

Research design

The study employed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of ECARP implementation. The design was chosen because the research sought detailed accounts of how teachers understood reading policy, how they enacted it under school conditions, and how they interpreted the barriers affecting implementation. A basic qualitative approach permits examination of meanings, practices, and institutional conditions that cannot be captured adequately through numerical indicators alone.

Locale, participants, sampling, and transferability

The study was conducted in Baguio City and La Trinidad, Benguet. These adjacent localities were selected because their public schools have sustained experience with national reading initiatives, school-based reading programs, and Phil-IRI assessment. They are also comparatively accessible and have historically performed at or above national averages on reading-related indicators. This last feature is analytically consequential and is treated explicitly as a limitation rather than an incidental detail. ECARP-related challenges are likely to be more severe in low-performing, rural, or geographically remote schools, where material constraints, supervision distance, and home support difficulties are amplified. The findings of this study should therefore be read as analytically transferable to settings with comparable institutional conditions, not as a statistically generalizable account of ECARP implementation across the country.

Participants were 34 public school teachers from selected elementary and secondary schools, drawn through purposive sampling. Six elementary and four secondary schools were selected from Baguio City Schools Division, and four elementary and two secondary schools were selected from La Trinidad. The sample focused on teachers in Grades 4 to 6 and Grade 7 because these levels make visible both the cumulative effects of early reading instruction and the persistent presence of struggling readers entering higher grades. Selection criteria required participants to be currently engaged in implementing ECARP, related reading programs, reading assessment, or remediation activities, ensuring information-rich accounts. Participants varied in years of teaching experience to capture diverse perspectives on policy continuity over time.

Data collection instrument and procedure

Semi-structured key informant interviews were the primary data collection instrument. The interview guide contained open-ended questions on familiarity with ECARP, perceived importance of reading policies, school-level implementation, classroom strategies, training, materials, barriers, learner needs, parental support, administrative support, and recommendations for improvement (see Appendix). The semi-structured format permitted comparable questioning across participants while accommodating significant experiences raised by individual teachers.

Formal permission was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendents of Baguio City and La Trinidad before data collection. Courtesy visits were made to school heads, the study purpose was explained, and teachers were invited to participate voluntarily. Interviews were conducted in person at the participants' schools, generally after class hours, and lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. A log sheet documented participation and enabled follow-up clarification where necessary. Data collection spanned three weeks.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

Because this study addresses a public literacy problem and is openly advocacy-oriented in its concern for reading improvement, researcher positionality required explicit attention. The researcher approached the inquiry as an education advocate who recognizes both the urgency of the reading crisis and the value of teacher voice in policy refinement. This stance provided motivation for the study but also created a risk of reading teacher narratives primarily as evidence for a pre-existing critique of the system. Three reflexive practices were used to manage this risk.

First, analytic memoing was conducted alongside transcript review and coding. Memos separated participant descriptions from researcher inferences, flagged moments where the researcher felt confirmation of prior assumptions, and noted points where teacher accounts complicated those assumptions. Second, the analysis deliberately preserved positive, ambivalent, and critical accounts of ECARP rather than selectively foregrounding critical material. Where teachers described principals as supportive ($n = 19$), this was reported alongside accounts of leadership disengagement ($n = 15$). Third, quotations were selected for thematic relevance and frequency rather than rhetorical force; quotes were included only when the underlying point was reported by multiple participants. These practices were intended to strengthen credibility while retaining the study's practical commitment to literacy improvement.

Data analysis, trustworthiness, and thematic sufficiency

Interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with repeated reading of transcripts to gain familiarity. Initial codes were generated across the data set, including codes on policy awareness, confusion between ECARP and newer initiatives, training gaps, material shortages, workload, leadership support, parental engagement, reporting pressure, and teacher-identified improvements. Related codes were grouped into candidate themes and reviewed against the data and the research questions. Themes were refined through cross-case comparison so that they captured coherent patterns while preserving important variation across teacher accounts.

The study does not claim universal data saturation across all ECARP implementation contexts. Instead, following Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi (2017), it claims thematic sufficiency within the 34-interview data set. A saturation/thematic sufficiency matrix was maintained across the seven core interview domains (awareness, implementation, training, materials, leadership, parental engagement, and reporting). Each domain was tracked across consecutive interviews to determine when new transcripts began producing primarily confirmatory rather than novel thematic content. Across the seven domains, no new sub-themes emerged after approximately interviews 26 to 28, and the final six interviews mainly added illustrative variation to themes already identified — for instance, additional examples of leadership turnover or reporting pressure rather than new categories. This pattern supports the claim of thematic sufficiency for the study's research questions, subject to the transferability limitations discussed above.

Trustworthiness was addressed across four dimensions. Credibility was supported by careful transcription review, use of direct quotations, comparison of themes across schools, and explicit alignment of findings with the conceptual framework. Dependability was supported by documented coding decisions and an audit trail organized around the research questions. Confirmability was strengthened by the reflexive memoing described in Section 2.4, which separated participant accounts from researcher interpretation. Transferability was supported by thick description of locale, participant characteristics, and implementation context to allow readers to judge applicability to other settings.

Ethical considerations

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the use of interview data for research. Identities and schools were anonymized; participants are identified by codes such as T2, T9, and T19. Audio recording was conducted only with explicit consent. Sensitive comments, particularly those involving administrative pressure and reporting practices, were reported in a manner that protected participant confidentiality, including the omission of identifying contextual detail.

Results

Findings are organized around the study's research questions and the theoretical framework introduced in Section 1.3. The results show that teachers strongly support the goal of reading programs but identify serious gaps in policy communication, instructional support, leadership continuity, parental engagement, and accountability practices. Each subsection draws explicit links to one or more theoretical lenses where appropriate, and Section 3.8 provides an integrative theoretical mapping.

Nominal and functional awareness of ECARP

A central finding is that teacher awareness of ECARP was largely nominal rather than functional. Twenty-five of the 34 teachers (73.5%) reported some awareness of ECARP or

related reading initiatives. However, only 11 teachers (32.4%) demonstrated clear understanding of ECARP's objectives, assessment expectations, and operational procedures. Fourteen had heard of ECARP but lacked deep understanding, and nine had limited or no awareness. The headline figure of 73.5% therefore overstates the implementation reach of ECARP if read as a measure of program uptake.

Several quotations make this distinction concrete. T2 explained, "I'm aware that we have several reading policies and subsequent activities that embody reading but I didn't know that it all came originally from the ECARP." T9 similarly stated, "I've been hearing about the ECARP before, yet I was not fully aware that it had something to do with reading or making a child a reader." Teachers also conflated ECARP with later or parallel initiatives — Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Catch-up Fridays, the 3Bs Initiative, and school-coined programs such as DREAM, Binnadang, and DARNA. Recognition of newer initiatives did not in itself evidence functional ECARP knowledge; in several cases, teachers recognized the more recent activity but had not encountered ECARP as a coherent policy framework.

Read through diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003), this pattern indicates that the policy label diffused widely through communication channels but the operational content of ECARP — its assessment expectations, remediation procedures, and reporting standards — did not consistently travel with it. From a top-down/bottom-up implementation perspective (Sabatier, 1986), this suggests that downward communication channels conveyed enough of the policy to elicit nominal recognition without conveying enough to support functional adoption. The implication is methodological as well as substantive: future evaluations of reading-policy implementation should assess functional adoption (objectives, procedures, accountability) and not rely on awareness counts alone.

Table 1
Teacher Awareness and Understanding of ECARP

Awareness Level	Frequency (n = 34)	Percentage
Aware and functionally understands objectives	11	32.4%
Aware by name or association but lacks deep understanding	14	41.1%
Limited or no awareness	9	26.5%

Program continuity, local adaptation, and communication channels

ECARP was rarely implemented as a single, clearly identified program. Schools enacted reading policy through localized activities, renamed projects, or later DepEd initiatives. Examples included school-based programs such as DREAM, Binnadang, DARNA, Project U-READ, peer teaching and buddy-up arrangements, pull-out remediation, reading camps, and tutorials. These adaptations show that schools were not passive recipients of policy; they actively adjusted reading initiatives to local needs and resources, sometimes drawing on volunteer groups (e.g., university students, service organizations) for additional support.

Yet local adaptation produced fragmentation as well as innovation. In diffusion-of-innovations terms, the communication channels carried the general expectation that reading must be prioritized, but they did not consistently transmit the operational meaning of ECARP.

Consequently, teachers could enthusiastically support reading activity while remaining uncertain about ECARP's original objectives. In top-down/bottom-up terms, central policy was reinterpreted at the school level, yet the upward feedback loop from classrooms to policymakers appeared weak. T21 stated, "We just receive memos and implement. There is no real venue where teachers' actual experiences feed back into how the policy is improved." This combination — strong downward cascade and weak upward feedback — is precisely the asymmetry that bottom-up implementation theorists warn against.

Training, materials, and teacher self-efficacy

Training and materials emerged as the most frequently cited implementation supports. Twenty-eight teachers (82.4%) reported lacking formal ECARP-specific training. Teachers commonly relied on self-study, online searches, brief re-echo sessions, or informal peer sharing. T19 said, "I only heard about those whose names are included in the memo to attend a seminar-training for this program, but I never had the chance to be chosen. So I do self-study and research online." T20 added that little could be expected from a one-hour re-echo of a longer seminar. These accounts indicate that training was neither equitably distributed nor sustained enough to build common instructional competence.

The shortage of validated, ready-to-use, age-appropriate materials was reported by 29 teachers (85.3%). Concerns extended beyond quantity to suitability: teachers wanted materials matched to learners' reading levels, ages, and contexts. T19 emphasized that materials should be level-appropriate and paired with training; T24 explained that ready-made and carefully crafted materials would significantly reduce preparation burden. Read through social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), these gaps directly affect teacher self-efficacy. When teachers lack mastery experiences (training they actually attend), modelling (well-prepared materials demonstrating quality), and a supportive environment (time and validation), their confidence and consistency in implementing reading instruction are weakened. The shortage of materials therefore is not merely a logistical issue; it is an instructional capacity issue.

Time constraints and reportorial workload

Heavy workload and time constraints were identified as obstacles by 27 teachers (79.4%). Teachers described a tension between the purpose of reading programs and the reportorial tasks attached to them. T32 observed, "The side goal of submitting reports sidetracks the very goal and purpose of the reading program." T26 cited shortened class periods, shifting schedules, frequent meetings, lack of materials, and weak home reinforcement as combined barriers. T34 noted that after-class remediation became inconsistent because of meetings and other activities. T7 drew attention to a structural mismatch: "Other reading policies are only addressing the struggling/non-readers but the activities involve the entire class such as the catch-up Fridays, DEAR. Class size and population."

Time constraints are not merely scheduling difficulties. They reveal a system in which administrative compliance and instructional improvement compete for the same teacher hours. From a change management perspective (Phillips & Klein, 2023), this is a classic readiness problem: organizations cannot adopt a sustained change initiative if existing demands are not rebalanced to accommodate it.

Misinterpretation of policies and pressure on reporting

Teachers expressed confusion and pressure regarding the interpretation of "No Child Left Behind," inclusivity provisions, and the identification of non-readers. T19 argued that misinterpretation of the No Child Left Behind framing produced de facto mass promotion,

leaving teachers to bear the consequences when learners remained unable to read. T17 added that pressure to pass struggling readers, combined with the spiral structure of the K-12 curriculum, compounded the reading problem. T16 reported frustration that issues raised about the inclusivity policy did not receive substantive response from supervisors.

More striking, however, were repeated accounts of pressure to revise honest reading reports. T33 recalled, "When I submitted my report and made it a point to reflect the exact figures and levels of the frustrated/non-readers, I received a call from the Division Office telling me to rectify it." T30 explained that DepEd's working definition of "non-reader" was unclear in practice — a learner could be classified as a reader if they could recognize the alphabet and write their own name — and that teachers "are reprimanded for submitting honest and truthful report about the existence or presence of non-readers and are asked to rectify or revise the report so as not to tarnish the district or division's image or reputation." T13 reported being interrupted during an outdoor read-aloud activity for violating a "no disturbance" policy, illustrating how local rule enforcement could override sanctioned reading interventions.

These accounts suggest that implementation is shaped by accountability incentives that may reward presentable reports more than accurate diagnosis. The implication is theoretically significant. From an implementation analysis perspective, ECARP's effectiveness is conditioned not only by training and resources but also by the institutional rewards attached to honest data. This finding is taken up in Section 4.2 as a structural explanation for why reading-policy problems persist.

Table 2

Teacher-Reported Implementation Constraints

Constraint	Frequency	Percentage
Need for ready-to-use, level-appropriate materials	29	85.3%
Lack of formal ECARP-specific training	28	82.4%
Heavy workload and time constraints	27	79.4%
Need for clearer policies and program standards	26	76.5%
Difficulty engaging parents in remediation	24	70.6%

Administrative leadership and program continuity

Leadership continuity emerged as a decisive condition for implementation. Nineteen teachers (55.9%) described supportive principals; 15 (44.1%) described school heads as nonchalant, hesitant, or insufficiently involved. T12 illustrated the dynamic vividly: "During the time of the previous principal, she was very pushy and directly involved in pressing for innovations that she really wanted to sit down and plan with us. But when the reshuffling of administrators happened, with the current principal, he is so nonchalant and hesitant to get involved. I'm not even sure if he knows we have an active reading program. As a result, these active reading programs have been discontinued and terminated." Teachers T16, T17, and T18 from another school echoed the same trajectory under a different administrative reshuffle.

Read through change management theory (Phillips & Klein, 2023), these accounts reveal the classic vulnerability of reform that depends on individual champions rather than institutionalized systems. When program continuity rests on the personal interest of a particular

school head, leadership turnover predictably produces discontinuation. Sustainable ECARP implementation requires routines, role definitions, transition protocols, and accountability mechanisms that survive personnel change. This finding also exposes a limit of top-down policy: a directive can require schools to conduct reading activities, but it cannot by itself produce sustained leadership, protected time, or instructional collaboration.

Parental and community engagement

Twenty-four teachers (70.6%) identified difficulty engaging parents in remediation. Some parents prioritized livelihood and household responsibilities, declined permission for after-class reading activities, or treated reading improvement as solely the school's concern. T11 described parents focused on immediate domestic needs. T13 explained that even when teachers incentivized learners to attend reading activities, parents sometimes refused to permit children to stay after class. T2 recalled providing assessment results and materials to a parent without seeing follow-through at home. T6 summarized a recurring sentiment: "Parents today have a different mindset, they think that it's the sole responsibility of the school and teachers to make their children learn to read."

These accounts should not be read as blaming parents. They reveal that reading support is a school-home-community problem and that parental disengagement is itself shaped by economic conditions, perceptions of institutional responsibility, and the absence of practical home-reading guidance. For ECARP, this implies that implementation standards should incorporate realistic, accessible, and culturally responsive parental engagement strategies rather than assuming such conditions already exist.

Teacher-identified improvement measures

Teachers proposed practical and system-level improvements. The most frequent recommendation was the provision of ready, validated, level-appropriate reading materials (30 teachers, 88.2%). Twenty-eight teachers (82.4%) called for stronger training in reading assessment and remediation. Twenty-six (76.5%) recommended clearer and standardized reading policies and program expectations. Twenty-four (70.6%) recommended stronger parental and community participation. Twenty-one (61.8%) emphasized the need to involve teachers in policy review and feedback mechanisms.

Teachers further called for honest reporting and meaningful consultation. T5 stated that DepEd policy crafters should consult teachers in the field because teachers know learner needs. T21 wanted a mechanism through which teachers' voices could be heard rather than merely implementing top-down cascades. T32 argued that DepEd should go beyond reportorial accomplishments and examine the truth of reports rather than asking teachers to revise figures for cosmetic purposes. These recommendations point toward an implementation model that prioritizes evidence, teacher participation, and policy feedback — features consistent with bottom-up implementation theory.

Theoretical mapping of findings

Table 4 consolidates the theoretical readings introduced throughout this section. The mapping is interpretive rather than mechanical: most findings could be read through more than one lens, and the table identifies the lens that most directly clarifies each finding's mechanism.

Table 3
Teacher-Identified Improvement Measures

Improvement Measure	Frequency	Percentage
Provide ready, validated, and level-appropriate reading materials	30	88.2%
Strengthen training for reading assessment and remediation	28	82.4%
Clarify and standardize reading policies and program expectations	26	76.5%
Improve parental and community participation	24	70.6%
Involve teachers in policy review and feedback mechanisms	21	61.8%

Table 4
Theory-Informed Interpretation of Major Findings

Major Finding	Theoretical Lens	Interpretive Meaning
Nominal rather than functional ECARP awareness	Diffusion of Innovations	The policy label diffused; communication channels did not consistently transmit operational knowledge or move teachers from awareness to functional adoption.
Localized reading programmes and school adaptations	Top-down / Bottom-up Implementation	Schools adapted central policy productively, but the upward feedback loop from classrooms to policymakers was weak, producing fragmentation.
Training and material shortages	Social Cognitive Theory	Inadequate mastery experiences, modelling, and environmental support reduced teacher self-efficacy in reading instruction.
Leadership turnover disrupting reading programs	Change Management Theory	Reform depended on individual champions rather than institutional routines, making continuity vulnerable to personnel change.
Pressure to rectify reports and pass non-readers	Implementation as Political Economy (critical reading of all four lenses)	Accountability incentives privileged reputational protection over honest diagnosis, undermining the data foundation that all four implementation perspectives require.

Discussion

ECARP as an implementation system, not merely a policy

The findings indicate that ECARP's central challenge is not teacher rejection of reading programs. All 34 teachers recognized the importance of reading interventions; the issue was

that policy commitment had not consistently translated into implementation fidelity. Teachers reported confusion about ECARP's distinct identity, uneven training, material shortages, inconsistent leadership, competing workload demands, weak home support, and pressure on honest reporting. These conditions help explain how a policy with broadly accepted purpose can produce uneven classroom effects.

This finding extends previous research on Philippine education reform. Bautista, Bernardo, and Ocampo (2008) observed that reforms can fail to transform practice when institutional conditions remain unchanged. The present study shows this pattern in reading-policy implementation: ECARP has been repeatedly reinforced through memoranda, renamed initiatives, and school-based activities, yet remains weak in functional terms because teachers do not receive clear operational guidance, protected time, validated materials, and credible feedback systems. The argument is not that policies are unimportant but that policies without implementation infrastructure tend to generate compliance, not learning.

Why similar problems persist after two decades

An important contribution of this study is its account of why ECARP-related problems persist despite repeated policy iteration. Comparison with previous studies (David et al., 2019; Idulog et al., 2023; Lucas et al., 2021) shows that the issues identified — limited training, scarce materials, workload pressures, and inconsistent leadership — are not new. The recurrence of these problems across studies and across decades suggests that they are not merely operational lapses awaiting better project management. They are sustained by structural incentives that the existing literature has not fully theorized.

Three interlocking incentive dynamics, evident across teacher accounts, help explain persistence. First, the system in which schools, districts, and divisions operate evaluates performance partly through reportable indicators — pass rates, program accomplishments, learner classifications. When the indicator most easily controlled by the reporting unit is the report itself rather than the underlying instructional reality, accurate reading diagnosis becomes reputationally costly. T33's instruction to "rectify" honest reading figures and T30's account of teachers being "reprimanded for submitting honest and truthful report" are not isolated administrative misjudgements; they are predictable outputs of a system in which presentable numbers are rewarded above presentable practice.

Second, the misinterpretation of "No Child Left Behind" and inclusivity provisions, as described by T17 and T19, creates promotion pressures that detach grade level from reading proficiency. Once promotion is institutionally easier than retention or targeted remediation, teachers in upper grades inherit non-readers without commensurate remedial support. Each cycle reproduces the problem: a learner not yet reading at the expected level is moved forward, the report is acceptable, and the next teacher faces the same problem under the same constraints. T17's observation that the spiral curriculum "adds confusion and compounded the reading problem" identifies how pedagogical structure interacts with promotion incentives to entrench difficulty.

Third, program proliferation itself can become an incentive. New initiatives — DEAR, Catch-up Fridays, 3Bs, school-coined programs — generate documented activity, photographs, and reports. Each program demonstrates institutional responsiveness, regardless of whether it consolidates the operational learning of earlier programs. The risk identified by diffusion-of-innovations theory is that the appearance of innovation diffuses faster than the substance: teachers recognize the names but not the procedures, and the cumulative effect is fragmentation

rather than coherent capacity-building. The teacher comments that conflate ECARP with newer activities are not evidence of teacher confusion alone; they are evidence of a policy environment in which substantive learning from each iteration is not systematically captured before the next iteration begins.

The implication is not that reporting, inclusion, or program innovation should be abandoned. Reporting is necessary; inclusion is non-negotiable; innovation can be productive. The argument is that the system of incentives surrounding these elements must be rebalanced. Schools that report many struggling readers should be treated as sites requiring targeted assistance rather than reputational repair. Promotion decisions should be paired with explicit remediation entitlements rather than left to teachers to absorb. New programs should be required to articulate how they consolidate, rather than displace, the learning of prior initiatives. Without these structural shifts, ECARP and related programs are likely to continue cycling through new names, campaigns, and directives without altering the classroom realities teachers describe.

Reconnecting findings to the theoretical framework

Each of the four theoretical lenses introduced in Section 1.3 contributes a distinct interpretive layer. Top-down/bottom-up implementation theory (Sabatier, 1986) clarifies the asymmetry observed in the data: ECARP is issued from the center, but its operational meaning is produced locally, and the upward feedback channel through which classroom evidence might refine policy is structurally weak. Productive bottom-up adaptation, visible in school-coined reading programs, exists; but without a credible feedback architecture, adaptation tends toward fragmentation rather than coherent improvement.

Change management theory (Phillips & Klein, 2023) clarifies the leadership-continuity findings. ECARP-related programs that depended on engaged principals collapsed when those principals were transferred. Sustainable change requires institutional routines, transition protocols, role definitions, and monitoring practices that outlast individual leaders. The reform challenge is not to find more passionate principals but to embed reading-policy implementation in school structures that survive personnel change.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) clarifies the training and materials findings. Teacher self-efficacy in reading instruction depends on mastery experiences, modelling, and supportive environmental conditions. When teachers rely on self-study, brief re-echo sessions, and self-prepared materials, the developmental conditions for self-efficacy are absent. Training is therefore not a one-off transmission of content but a sustained capacity-building process that should be designed, resourced, and protected as core implementation infrastructure.

Diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003) clarifies the awareness findings. The data suggest that ECARP diffused as a label and a general commitment to reading without consistently diffusing as a coherent set of practices. Teachers were positioned not as straightforward adopters or non-adopters but as nominal recognizers whose adoption category is genuinely ambiguous. This implies a methodological correction for future implementation evaluations: distinguish nominal awareness from functional adoption, and treat communication channels as objects of design — not assumed conduits — through which operational knowledge must actually travel.

Implications for practice and policy

Seven implications follow from the findings. First, ECARP requires a clearer implementation guide that distinguishes its original objectives from related initiatives while showing how the initiatives connect; teachers should be able to identify objectives, assessment expectations, remediation procedures, reporting standards, and support structures. Second, teacher training should be regular, inclusive, and practice-based rather than reliant on memo-based selection and short re-echo sessions. Third, DepEd should provide validated reading materials aligned with learner reading levels and ages, reducing teacher preparation burden and improving instructional consistency. Fourth, schools require protected remediation time that is not displaced by meetings, reports, or unrelated activities. Fifth, accountability systems should reward truthful reporting: accurate reading data should trigger assistance, not pressure to revise figures. Sixth, teacher feedback should be institutionalized through bottom-up mechanisms — regular implementation reviews, teacher consultation groups, and division-level feedback loops. Seventh, parental and community engagement should be designed into program implementation through realistic, accessible, and culturally responsive home-reading strategies rather than being assumed.

Limitations and transferability

Three limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample of 34 teachers, although appropriate for qualitative inquiry, was drawn from two adjacent and comparatively accessible locations. As discussed in Section 2.2, ECARP-related challenges are likely to be more severe in rural, remote, and low-performing settings. The findings are analytically transferable to contexts where teachers implement national reading policies under workload, material, leadership, and reporting pressures, but they should not be read as a statistically generalizable account of ECARP nationwide.

Second, the study relies on teacher self-reports. While these reports are valuable for understanding implementation experience, they could productively be triangulated in future research with classroom observations, policy and program documents, learner reading records, and interviews with school heads, parents, and learners. Third, the study did not formally interview policy implementers at the division and central levels, whose accounts could illuminate the institutional logic behind reporting expectations and program proliferation. Future research that combines teacher accounts with administrative perspectives — and extends the locale to lower-performing and remote settings — would substantially strengthen the implementation-research base for ECARP.

Conclusion

This study examined teachers' views and challenges in implementing ECARP and related reading initiatives in Baguio City and La Trinidad. Teachers strongly support the goal of making every child a reader, but they experience ECARP through an uneven implementation system. Awareness is largely nominal rather than functional; training and materials are insufficient; administrative support varies with leadership; remediation time competes with workload and reporting; parental engagement is difficult to secure; and accountability pressures can discourage honest reporting of reading levels.

The study concludes that improving ECARP requires a shift from policy issuance to implementation infrastructure. Reading policies cannot succeed merely because they are mandated. They require clear standards, coherent communication, validated materials, sustained teacher training, leadership continuity, protected remediation time, transparent reporting, and institutionalized bottom-up feedback. The most urgent structural task is to

redesign accountability so that accurate diagnosis of reading difficulty is treated not as a reputational threat but as the necessary starting point for support. For practice, the study recommends that DepEd and school leaders strengthen teacher capacity, supply ready and appropriate materials, protect time for reading intervention, and embed teacher participation in policy review. For research, it recommends extending implementation studies to rural, remote, and low-performing areas where ECARP faces more severe constraints, and triangulating teacher accounts with classroom and document data. Only with these shifts can ECARP's foundational ambition — that every child be a reader — move closer to classroom reality.

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Appendix: Interview Guide for Teachers

1. How familiar are you with the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP) and its objectives?
2. If you are not familiar with ECARP, what DepEd reading programs or activities are you familiar with?
3. In your view, how important are ECARP and related reading programs in addressing literacy challenges in the Philippines?
4. How have ECARP policies or related reading initiatives been implemented in your school?
5. What strategies or practices have you adopted in your classroom to support ECARP goals?
6. Have you received adequate training and resources to implement ECARP or related reading programs effectively?
7. Do you have non-readers or struggling readers among your learners? How are they identified?
8. What are the main challenges you have encountered in implementing reading interventions?
9. How do you navigate these challenges, and what additional support do you need?
10. How do parents and learners respond to ECARP-related activities and remediation efforts?
11. How could ECARP be improved to better support teachers and learners?
12. What specific policy adjustments, tools, materials, training, or support mechanisms would strengthen implementation?
13. How can DepEd better support teachers and schools in achieving the objectives of ECARP?
14. What role should teachers and school administrators have in shaping future reading policies?