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Learners' Experiences and Educational Perspectives on the Implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela

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Abstract

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as a vital educational intervention for out-of-school youth, adult learners, and marginalized individuals who encounter barriers in accessing formal education. This study explored the learners' experiences and educational perspectives on the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela. Anchored on Transformative Learning Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory, the study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to examine learners' educational experiences, participation, instructional interactions, and perceived challenges within ALS implementation. Participants included selected ALS learners, ALS teachers, and community stakeholders in the Santa Maria District. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was utilized in analyzing the gathered data. Findings revealed that ALS implementation provides learners with flexible, accessible, and inclusive educational opportunities that support personal growth, literacy development, and life skills acquisition. Learners described ALS as a second chance for education that strengthened their confidence, motivation, and aspirations for future employment and academic advancement. The findings further revealed that supportive ALS teachers, contextualized instruction, and community support significantly contributed to learner participation and persistence. However, challenges such as financial difficulties, inconsistent attendance, limited learning resources, transportation barriers, and balancing work and family responsibilities affected learners' educational engagement. The study concludes that ALS implementation significantly contributes to educational inclusion and learner empowerment among marginalized sectors. Strengthening instructional resources, community partnerships, learner support mechanisms, and flexible learning strategies is recommended to improve ALS implementation and learner participation.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System, ALS implementation, flexible learning system, Constructivist Learning Theory

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Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and an essential instrument for social mobility, personal development, and national progress. However, many individuals continue to face barriers in accessing formal education due to poverty, geographical isolation, family responsibilities, early employment, health concerns, and other socio-economic circumstances. These barriers contribute to school dropout, educational exclusion, and limited learning opportunities among marginalized sectors of society.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education established the Alternative Learning System (ALS) as a parallel and flexible learning program designed to provide educational opportunities for out-of-school youth, adult learners, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups who are unable to access or complete formal schooling. ALS aims to promote inclusive education by providing learners with flexible, learner-centered, and community-based educational experiences that address literacy development, life skills, and continuing education opportunities.

The implementation of ALS plays an important role in addressing educational inequality and supporting lifelong learning among underserved populations. Through modular instruction, contextualized learning activities, flexible schedules, and community-based educational programs, ALS provides learners with opportunities to continue their education while balancing work, family, and personal responsibilities. ALS also serves as a pathway for learners to obtain accreditation and equivalency certifications that may support employment opportunities and further educational advancement.

Despite its significant role in promoting educational inclusion, ALS implementation continues to encounter several challenges related to learner participation, instructional resources, accessibility, community support, and program sustainability. Learners enrolled in ALS programs often experience difficulties associated with financial limitations, transportation concerns, inconsistent attendance, lack of learning materials, and balancing educational participation with work and family obligations. Understanding learners' lived experiences and educational perspectives is therefore important in strengthening ALS implementation and improving learner support systems.

In the Santa Maria District, ALS programs provide educational opportunities to diverse learners who have discontinued formal schooling due to various socio-economic and personal circumstances. Learners enrolled in ALS possess varied educational backgrounds, life experiences, motivations, and learning needs. Exploring their experiences and perspectives provides valuable insights into the strengths, challenges, and educational impact of ALS implementation within the local context.

Several studies emphasized the importance of flexible and inclusive learning systems in supporting marginalized learners and promoting educational equity. Torres and Pitman (2020) argued that alternative education programs provide transformative learning opportunities that empower learners socially, economically, and personally. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) emphasized that inclusive and flexible learning systems strengthen lifelong learning and educational access among underserved populations.

Although ALS implementation has been widely discussed in educational literature, there remains limited qualitative research focusing on learners' lived experiences and educational perspectives regarding ALS implementation within rural Philippine districts. Thus, this study aimed to explore the learners' experiences and educational perspectives on the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Transformative Learning Theory by Mezirow (1997) and Constructivist Learning Theory by Vygotsky (1978). Transformative Learning Theory posits that education enables learners to critically reflect on their experiences, transform their perspectives, and develop new understandings that influence personal growth and empowerment. Through meaningful educational experiences, learners become more capable of improving their self-confidence, decision-making, and future aspirations.

Constructivist Learning Theory explains that learners actively construct knowledge through social interaction, collaboration, reflection, and meaningful learning experiences. Learning becomes more effective when instructional approaches are contextualized, participatory, and connected to learners' lived experiences and social realities.

These theories provided the framework for understanding how ALS implementation influences learners' educational experiences, personal development, and engagement in nonformal education.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the learners' experiences and educational perspectives on the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela. Specifically, it sought to examine learners' educational experiences and participation in ALS programs and identify instructional practices and learning experiences that contribute to learner engagement and persistence in ALS. The study further aimed to explore learners' perceptions regarding the impact of ALS on their personal growth, educational development, and future aspirations. Additionally, it intended to identify the challenges encountered by learners in participating in ALS programs and learning activities. Finally, the study aimed to derive insights from the participants' experiences that may serve as basis for strengthening ALS implementation and improving learner support systems within the Santa Maria District.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the learners' experiences and educational perspectives regarding the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gather rich and contextualized descriptions regarding learners' educational experiences, classroom participation, instructional interactions, and challenges encountered in ALS implementation. Through qualitative inquiry, the study captured the lived experiences of ALS learners and examined how instructional environments and learning opportunities influence learner engagement and educational participation.

The study was conducted in selected ALS learning centers within the Santa Maria District, Isabela, Philippines. These learning centers operate under the supervision of the Department of Education and provide nonformal educational opportunities to out-of-school youth and adult learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The participants of the study included selected ALS learners, ALS teachers, and community stakeholders. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who possessed direct experiences and active involvement in ALS implementation and learning activities. The selected learners represented diverse educational backgrounds, age groups, and learning experiences within the ALS program.

The study utilized semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides, observation notes, and document analysis checklists as qualitative research instruments. Interview questions focused on educational experiences, learner participation, instructional support, personal growth, learning challenges, and perceptions regarding ALS implementation.

Prior to data gathering, permission was secured from relevant school and district authorities. Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' rights were strictly observed throughout the study. Data were gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The gathered data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. Significant statements and recurring patterns were identified, coded, categorized, and organized into themes representing learners' experiences and educational perspectives regarding ALS implementation. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and thick description to ensure credibility and dependability of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: ALS as a Second Chance for Education and Personal Growth

The findings revealed that learners perceive the Alternative Learning System (ALS) as an important opportunity for educational continuation, personal growth, and self-improvement. Participants consistently described ALS as a "second chance" that allowed them to continue their education despite previous experiences of school discontinuation caused by poverty, family responsibilities, early employment, and personal challenges.

One learner participant stated:

"Malaking tulong po ang ALS kasi nabigyan ako ng pagkakataong makapag-aral ulit."

Another participant shared:

"Akala ko hindi na ako makapagpatuloy ng pag-aaral pero dahil sa ALS nagkaroon ako ng pag-asa."

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Similarly, another learner explained:

“Sa ALS, natutunan kong maniwala ulit sa sarili ko.”

These responses indicate that ALS implementation contributes significantly to learners’ emotional empowerment, confidence-building, and educational motivation. Learners perceive ALS not merely as an academic program but as an opportunity to rebuild aspirations, improve self-worth, and achieve personal goals.

Participants also emphasized that ALS helped them develop positive attitudes toward education and future aspirations.

One learner participant stated:

“Mas naging motivated akong tapusin ang pag-aaral ko dahil sa ALS.”

Another participant explained:

“Gusto kong makapasa sa A&E para magkaroon ng magandang trabaho.”

The findings suggest that ALS implementation strengthens learners’ educational persistence and hope for future advancement. The program provides learners with opportunities to regain confidence and pursue aspirations previously interrupted by socio-economic and personal barriers.

The findings support Mezirow’s (1997) Transformative Learning Theory, which posits that education promotes self-reflection, perspective transformation, and personal empowerment among learners. Similarly, Torres and Pitman (2020) argued that alternative education programs empower marginalized learners by providing opportunities for self-development, educational inclusion, and social mobility.

The findings further align with UNESCO (2021), which emphasized that inclusive and flexible learning systems strengthen educational access and lifelong learning opportunities among underserved populations.

ALS teachers also observed noticeable improvements in learners’ confidence and participation over time.

One ALS teacher participant shared:

“Makikita mo talaga na nagiging confident sila habang tumatagal sa ALS.”

This finding highlights the transformative role of ALS implementation in promoting educational inclusion, self-confidence, and personal growth among learners.

Theme 2: Flexible and Contextualized Learning Strengthens Learner Engagement

The study further revealed that learners become more engaged in ALS when instruction is flexible, contextualized, and responsive to their realities and life experiences. Participants emphasized that ALS instructional approaches accommodate their schedules, responsibilities, and learning needs, allowing them to continue education while balancing work, family obligations, and personal circumstances.

One learner participant stated:

“Maganda po sa ALS kasi flexible ang oras at naiintindihan nila ang sitwasyon namin.”

Another participant shared:

“Nakakapagtrabaho pa rin ako habang nag-aaral sa ALS.”

Similarly, another learner explained:

“Mas naiintindihan namin ang lessons kapag related sa totoong buhay.”

The responses indicate that flexible and contextualized instruction positively influences learner participation and engagement in ALS programs. Learners appreciate instructional practices that recognize their socio-economic realities and provide practical, relatable, and meaningful learning experiences.

ALS teachers also highlighted the importance of contextualized instruction in improving learner participation and understanding.

One ALS teacher participant stated:

“Kailangan i-connect ang lessons sa real-life experiences nila para mas maintindihan nila.”

Another participant explained:

“Mas engaged sila kapag practical at relatable ang discussions.”

The findings imply that contextualized and learner-centered instructional practices strengthen cognitive engagement and meaningful learning among ALS learners. Learners become more interested and motivated when lessons are connected to everyday situations, livelihood experiences, and practical life skills.

The findings support Vygotsky’s (1978) Constructivist Learning Theory, which explains that learning becomes more effective when instruction is meaningful, contextualized, and connected to learners’ experiences. Similarly, Knowles et al. (2020) emphasized that adult and nonformal learners learn more effectively when instruction is relevant, experiential, and responsive to their needs and realities.

The findings further align with Freire (2018), who argued that transformative education should be grounded in learners’ social realities and lived experiences to promote meaningful learning and empowerment.

Participants further emphasized that ALS learning sessions promote open communication, participation, and collaborative learning experiences.

One learner participant stated:

“Hindi kami nahihiyang magtanong kasi open at friendly ang environment.”

This finding highlights the importance of flexible and contextualized instructional environments in sustaining learner participation and engagement in ALS implementation.

Theme 3: Supportive Teachers and Community Relationships Promote Persistence

The findings revealed that supportive ALS teachers and positive community relationships significantly contribute to learners’ persistence and participation in ALS programs. Participants consistently described ALS teachers as patient, approachable, understanding, and supportive of learners’ educational struggles and personal circumstances.

One learner participant stated:

“Napakalaking tulong po ng ALS teacher namin kasi talagang iniintindi kami.”

Another participant explained:

“Kahit matagal akong absent, hinihikayat pa rin nila akong bumalik sa klase.”

Similarly, another learner shared:

“Hindi kami pinapahiya kapag may mali kami kaya mas comfortable kaming matuto.”

These responses indicate that emotionally supportive teacher-learner relationships strengthen learners’ emotional engagement, motivation, and educational persistence in ALS. Learners become more willing to participate when they feel respected, accepted, and encouraged by teachers.

ALS teachers also emphasized the importance of empathy and patience in handling ALS learners.

One ALS teacher participant stated:

“Kailangan talaga ng understanding dahil iba-iba ang pinagdadaanan ng learners.”

Another participant explained:

“Hindi lang academics ang tinutulongan namin kundi pati confidence nila.”

The findings suggest that supportive instructional relationships contribute significantly to learner retention, confidence, and classroom participation in ALS implementation.

The findings align with Fredricks et al. (2019), who argued that emotional engagement is strengthened when learners feel supported and respected within educational environments. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) emphasized that inclusive education programs require emotionally supportive learning spaces that encourage participation among marginalized learners.

The findings further revealed that community support positively influences ALS participation and program sustainability.

One community stakeholder participant stated:

“Sinusuportahan namin ang ALS kasi malaking tulong ito sa mga out-of-school youth.”

Another participant explained:

“Kapag nagtutulongan ang community at ALS teachers, mas marami ang natutulongan.”

These findings imply that collaborative community support systems strengthen ALS implementation and encourage learner participation within nonformal education programs.

Theme 4: Socio-Economic Challenges and Limited Resources Affect Participation

Despite positive educational experiences, the findings revealed that learners encounter several socio-economic and institutional challenges affecting their participation in ALS programs. Participants identified financial difficulties, transportation problems, family responsibilities, inconsistent attendance, limited learning resources, and balancing work and education as major barriers to educational participation.

One learner participant stated:

“Minsan hindi ako nakakapasok dahil kailangan kong magtrabaho.”

Another participant explained:

“Mahirap po minsan ang pamasaha kaya hindi ako regular na nakakapasok.”

Similarly, another learner shared:

“May mga pagkakataon na inuuna ko muna ang pamilya kaysa pag-aaral.”

These responses indicate that socio-economic realities significantly influence learners' educational participation and persistence in ALS. Learners continuously balance educational aspirations with financial survival, family obligations, and employment responsibilities.

ALS teachers also highlighted challenges related to instructional resources and learner attendance.

One ALS teacher participant stated:

“Minsan kulang ang modules at learning materials para sa learners.”

Another participant explained:

“Challenge talaga ang inconsistent attendance dahil marami silang responsibilidad.”

The findings suggest that resource limitations and socio-economic barriers affect instructional implementation and learner engagement within ALS programs.

The findings align with UNESCO (2021), which highlighted that marginalized learners often encounter socio-economic barriers affecting educational access and participation. Similarly, OECD (2019) emphasized that poverty, resource limitations, and educational inequality significantly influence learning participation and persistence.

Participants further revealed that transportation difficulties and geographical distance affect regular attendance.

One learner participant stated:

“Malayo po ang learning center kaya minsan nahihirapan akong pumasok.”

This finding implies that accessible learning support systems and flexible instructional approaches are necessary to sustain learner participation in ALS implementation.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasized that ALS continues to provide hope and opportunities for educational continuation.

One learner participant shared:

“Kahit mahirap, pinipilit ko pa ring mag-aral dahil gusto kong makatapos.”

This finding highlights the resilience and determination of ALS learners in pursuing education despite socio-economic and personal difficulties.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Santa Maria District, Isabela significantly contributes to educational inclusion, personal empowerment, and lifelong learning opportunities among marginalized learners. ALS serves as a second chance for education by providing flexible and accessible learning opportunities for out-of-school youth, adult learners, and individuals who encounter barriers in formal education.

The findings further revealed that flexible and contextualized instructional approaches strengthen learner engagement, participation, and persistence in ALS programs. Learners become more motivated and actively involved when instruction is practical, learner-centered, and connected to their lived experiences and socio-economic realities. Supportive ALS teachers and positive community relationships also contribute significantly to learners' confidence, motivation, and educational participation.

However, the study also found that socio-economic difficulties, transportation barriers, family responsibilities, inconsistent attendance, limited instructional resources, and balancing work and education continue to affect learner participation and program implementation. Despite these challenges, ALS learners demonstrate resilience, determination, and strong aspirations for educational completion and future advancement.

Overall, the study concludes that ALS implementation plays a transformative role in promoting inclusive education, learner empowerment, and educational access among underserved populations. Strengthening instructional support systems, community partnerships, learner assistance programs, and contextualized instructional practices is essential in improving ALS implementation and sustaining learner participation.

Implications of the Study

The findings of the study provide important implications for nonformal education, inclusive learning systems, educational leadership, community engagement, and educational policy. The study emphasizes the importance of flexible, learner-centered, and supportive educational environments in strengthening educational access and learner participation among marginalized sectors.

Educational Implications

The findings imply that ALS implementation should continue strengthening flexible and contextualized instructional approaches that respond to learners' socio-economic realities, responsibilities, and learning needs. ALS instructional programs should prioritize learner-centered pedagogies, practical learning experiences, and contextualized instruction that connect lessons to real-life situations and livelihood experiences.

The study further implies that ALS programs should strengthen educational support systems that encourage learner persistence, confidence-building, and emotional engagement. Supportive learning environments contribute significantly to improving learner motivation and participation in nonformal education.

Additionally, the findings suggest that ALS implementation should integrate life skills development, literacy enhancement, and career-oriented learning opportunities to help learners achieve educational and socio-economic advancement.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings imply that ALS teachers play a crucial role in promoting learner engagement, emotional support, and educational persistence among ALS learners. Teachers should demonstrate empathy, patience, encouragement, and

instructional flexibility in addressing the diverse educational backgrounds and personal circumstances of ALS learners.

The study also highlights the importance of contextualized and experiential learning approaches in nonformal education. ALS teachers may integrate collaborative discussions, practical applications, reflective learning activities, and community-based instructional strategies to improve learner participation and meaningful learning experiences.

Furthermore, the findings imply that emotionally supportive teacher-learner relationships strengthen learner confidence, persistence, and educational motivation within ALS implementation.

Institutional and Policy Implications

The findings provide important implications for educational leaders and policymakers within the Department of Education regarding the strengthening of ALS implementation and learner support mechanisms. Educational institutions may strengthen ALS programs by providing adequate instructional materials, transportation assistance, learning modules, technological support, and accessible learning centers for ALS learners.

The study further implies the need for stronger community partnerships and stakeholder collaboration to support ALS sustainability and learner participation. Local government units, community organizations, and educational institutions may collaborate in strengthening learner support programs and educational outreach initiatives.

Moreover, the findings suggest the importance of increasing educational funding and institutional support for nonformal education programs to improve resource availability and instructional implementation.

Social Implications

The findings imply that ALS implementation contributes significantly to social inclusion, empowerment, and educational equity among marginalized populations. By providing second-chance educational opportunities, ALS helps reduce educational inequality and supports learners' aspirations for personal development and improved socio-economic opportunities.

The study also highlights the importance of community awareness and support in promoting educational participation among out-of-school youth and adult learners.

Implications for Future Research

The findings highlight the need for future studies exploring ALS implementation across different educational contexts and learner populations. Future researchers may conduct comparative studies involving urban and rural ALS programs to examine differences in learner experiences, instructional practices, and program implementation. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies may also be conducted to explore the long-term educational, social, and economic impacts of ALS participation among learners.

Future studies may likewise investigate the role of technology integration, community engagement, and policy implementation in strengthening ALS delivery and learner participation.

The study emphasizes that strengthening ALS implementation requires collaborative efforts among teachers, educational leaders, communities, policymakers, and learners. Flexible learning systems, supportive educational environments, contextualized instruction, and strong learner support mechanisms are essential in promoting inclusive education and improving educational opportunities among marginalized learners.

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