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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teaching Diverse Learners in the Alternative Learning System: A Qualitative Exploration of Pedagogical Practices and Learner Support in Banaue

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Abstract

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) provides flexible educational opportunities for learners who are unable to participate continuously in formal schooling. Its heterogeneous learner population, however, presents instructional demands that require teachers to adapt content, delivery, assessment, and learner support to varied educational backgrounds, life circumstances, literacy levels, and learning needs. This qualitative study explores the pedagogical practices and learner-support strategies employed by Alternative Learning System teachers in Banaue, with particular attention to how educators respond to learner diversity in non-formal and flexible learning environments. Guided by an interpretive qualitative perspective, the study seeks to document teachers' instructional experiences, adaptive practices, challenges, and insights regarding learner engagement and support. Data are proposed to be generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected ALS teachers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The inquiry is expected to illuminate context-responsive teaching, differentiated instructional practices, relational forms of learner support, resource-related constraints, and teacher adaptations that characterize ALS delivery. Rather than evaluating teachers against a predetermined model, the study foregrounds their situated experiences and professional reasoning. The findings may provide context-based evidence for strengthening teacher development, instructional support, learning resources, and learner-responsive policies in the Alternative Learning System.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System, learner diversity, pedagogical practices, learner support, qualitative research, Banaue, flexible education

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1. Introduction

Education systems increasingly recognize that learners do not enter educational environments with uniform experiences, abilities, motivations, or circumstances. These differences become particularly visible in flexible and non-formal education settings, where learners may have interrupted schooling, work and family responsibilities, varying literacy and numeracy levels, different age profiles, and diverse reasons for returning to education. In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System provides a parallel pathway through which out-of-school children, youth, and adults may access basic education outside conventional classroom arrangements. The Department of Education describes ALS as flexible and community-based, allowing learning to occur in settings and schedules responsive to learners' circumstances.

The institutionalization and continuing reform of ALS reflect a broader commitment to educational inclusion. Rather than requiring learners to conform entirely to the structures of formal schooling, ALS is designed to provide alternative pathways through which learners may develop basic and functional literacy and complete equivalent levels of basic education. Its flexibility is one of its defining strengths, yet flexibility also places significant instructional responsibility on teachers and learning facilitators. Educators must determine how to present competencies, organize learning activities, monitor progress, sustain participation, and provide support to learners whose educational and personal circumstances may differ substantially from one another.

Recent qualitative studies suggest that ALS teaching involves considerably more than the delivery of prescribed content. Teachers have reported responding to learner diversity, limited instructional materials, constrained instructional time, emotional demands, and the need for strong interpersonal engagement. A qualitative study of ALS teachers involved in English literacy instruction, for example, identified learner diversity and limited materials among the challenges encountered by educators, alongside the physical, mental, emotional, and social demands of ALS teaching. Another qualitative exploration of ALS teachers working with adult learners highlighted responsiveness, adaptation to educational gaps, experiential and practical learning, logistical constraints, and mutual learning as central aspects of teachers' experiences.

These findings point to the importance of examining pedagogical practice as a situated process. In ALS, effective teaching may require teachers to modify explanations, pace, activities, examples, learning materials, and modes of interaction according to learner readiness and circumstance. Such practices are particularly important because learners may differ not only academically but also in employment status, family responsibilities, confidence, previous schooling experiences, access to technology, and capacity to attend learning sessions consistently.

Studies focusing on ALS learners likewise demonstrate that learner participation is shaped by conditions extending beyond academic ability. Research has documented challenges involving reading comprehension, family support, low self-confidence, poverty, peer pressure, interrupted schooling, internet access, and difficulties completing learning modules. During periods of disrupted schooling, ALS learners have also experienced difficulties related to gadgets, connectivity, module completion, shyness, and reduced face-to-face interaction. Such conditions suggest that learner support in ALS cannot be understood exclusively as academic remediation. It may also involve motivational, relational, logistical, and contextual support.

At the policy level, ALS monitoring and implementation mechanisms emphasize locating learners, supporting community learning centers, and responding to learners' needs through operational and strategic information. However, system-level frameworks do not always reveal how teachers actually interpret learner needs or how they make pedagogical decisions during day-to-day instruction. Understanding these practices requires closer attention to educators' experiences.

This issue is especially important in geographically and culturally distinct settings. Banaue provides a meaningful context in which to explore how ALS teachers negotiate learner diversity while working within local community realities. However, this study does not assume in advance what those realities are or how they affect instruction. Instead, it seeks to understand them through the accounts of ALS educators themselves.

Much existing ALS research has examined program implementation, learner experiences, literacy challenges, and teachers' general experiences. There remains value in more focused inquiry into the intersection of learner diversity, pedagogical adaptation, and learner support, particularly in localized ALS settings. Such an inquiry may reveal not only the challenges faced by educators but also the practical knowledge they develop in responding to heterogeneous learners.

Accordingly, this study explores the pedagogical practices and learner-support strategies of ALS teachers in Banaue. It focuses on how teachers understand learner diversity, how they adjust instruction, what forms of support they provide, what challenges they encounter, and what insights they derive from these experiences.

2. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do ALS teachers describe the diversity of learners they encounter in their teaching context?

2. What pedagogical practices do ALS teachers use to respond to learners' varied educational needs and circumstances?
3. How do ALS teachers provide academic, motivational, relational, and contextual support to diverse learners?
4. What challenges do teachers encounter in adapting instruction and providing learner support?
5. What insights do ALS teachers develop from their experiences of teaching diverse learners?

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Alternative Learning System as Flexible and Inclusive Education

The Philippine Alternative Learning System serves as a parallel educational pathway for learners who cannot participate effectively in conventional formal education. Its modular, flexible, and community-based characteristics allow learning to occur at times and places suited to learner circumstances. ALS reform has also emphasized learner-centeredness, inclusion, improved monitoring, and responsiveness to out-of-school youth and adults.

The inclusive purpose of ALS requires attention to heterogeneity. Learners may return to education after extended interruption, combine schooling with employment, assume family responsibilities, or carry previous experiences of academic difficulty. Consequently, ALS classrooms and learning centers may involve wide variation in readiness, confidence, age, and educational experience.

3.2 Learner Diversity in ALS

Learner diversity in ALS cannot be reduced to academic performance alone. Existing qualitative studies have reported differences in educational backgrounds, literacy needs, motivation, socioeconomic conditions, access to learning resources, and learner confidence. Reading-related challenges have been documented among ALS learners, while phenomenological studies have described financial difficulty, insufficient family support, and low self-confidence as factors affecting learner participation and educational experience.

These differences require teaching practices that recognize learners as individuals rather than treating ALS participants as a homogeneous group. The educational problem is therefore not merely how to cover prescribed competencies, but how to make those competencies accessible to learners whose starting points and circumstances vary.

3.3 Pedagogical Adaptation in Alternative Learning

Qualitative evidence suggests that ALS teachers routinely engage in adaptation. Francisco and Buri found that ALS teachers encountered learner diversity, limited instructional resources, limited time, and broader professional demands in literacy instruction. Dimas and Tribunalo likewise reported instructional responsiveness, adaptation to learning gaps, and the use of experiential and practical learning among ALS teachers.

Such findings indicate that ALS pedagogy involves professional judgment. Teachers may need to decide when to simplify explanations, provide additional examples, alter pacing, connect content to real-life situations, or use alternative ways for learners to demonstrate understanding. The quality of these adaptations may be central to whether learners remain engaged and experience progress.

3.4 Learner Support Beyond Academic Instruction

ALS learners may require forms of support that extend beyond subject instruction. Learners who have experienced interrupted education can bring concerns related to confidence, work, family obligations, financial limitations, or previous negative schooling experiences. Studies of ALS learners have shown how these personal and structural conditions influence participation and performance.

Learner support may therefore involve encouragement, flexibility, relationship-building, communication, monitoring, and responsiveness to circumstances that interfere with attendance or completion of learning tasks. This relational dimension is especially important in non-formal education, where learner persistence may depend partly on whether learners perceive the learning environment as respectful, relevant, and responsive.

3.5 Resource and Implementation Challenges

Despite the flexibility of ALS, implementation challenges remain. Recent qualitative work has identified limitations in resources and technology access, while broader implementation studies have emphasized gaps in policy translation, resources, and equitable opportunities.

Technology-related disparities may particularly affect flexible learning when digital resources are used. Limited devices, connectivity, or technological familiarity can alter what forms of instruction teachers can realistically employ. Teacher responsiveness therefore occurs within material and institutional constraints rather than in ideal conditions.

3.6 Need for Context-Specific Qualitative Inquiry

Existing studies establish that ALS teaching is complex, but teacher experiences vary according to setting. A localized qualitative inquiry can reveal practices that may be obscured in large-scale evaluation because it allows participants to explain how they interpret learner needs, why they choose particular teaching strategies, and how they negotiate contextual limitations.

The present study therefore focuses on Banaue and places teacher meaning-making at the center of analysis. Rather than testing whether predetermined strategies are effective, it asks how teachers themselves experience, interpret, and respond to learner diversity.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the pedagogical practices, learner-support strategies, challenges, and insights of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in Banaue, Ifugao. The study involved purposively selected ALS teachers or learning facilitators with direct experience in teaching learners with varied educational backgrounds, readiness levels, motivations, and life circumstances. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using guide questions focused on learner diversity, instructional adaptation, learner support, resource limitations, challenges, and professional insights. Probing questions were used when necessary to obtain richer and more detailed accounts from the participants.

The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, coding meaningful statements, comparing patterns across participants, clustering related codes, developing and reviewing themes, and constructing interpretations supported by verbatim participant responses. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, an audit trail, reflexivity, thick description, and the use of direct participant quotations. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, use of participant codes or pseudonyms, secure handling of interview data, and compliance with applicable institutional ethics requirements.

5. Results and Findings

The thematic analysis of the participants' narratives revealed six interrelated themes that characterize the pedagogical practices and learner-support strategies of teachers in the Alternative Learning System. These themes are: (1) Adaptive Pedagogy for Diverse Learning Needs; (2) Contextualized and Experiential Learning as a Bridge to Understanding; (3) Relational Support, Trust, and Motivation as Foundations of Learner Persistence; (4) Negotiating Attendance, Time, and Life Responsibilities; (5) Resource Constraints and Teacher Improvisation; and (6) Teaching as Mutual Learning and Professional Growth.

The themes demonstrate that teaching diverse ALS learners involves more than delivering prescribed learning competencies. Teachers continuously negotiate differences in readiness, life circumstances, access to resources, motivation, and prior educational experiences while attempting to sustain meaningful learner participation.

Theme 1: Adaptive Pedagogy for Diverse Learning Needs

A prominent theme emerging from the participants' narratives was the need to continuously adjust instruction according to differences in learners' readiness, educational background, literacy level, and pace of learning. The participants described ALS classes as heterogeneous learning environments in which a uniform instructional approach could not adequately address the needs of all learners.

One participant emphasized:

"I cannot teach all of them in the same way because some learners understand immediately while others need the lesson explained several times."

Another participant described how lesson complexity was adjusted according to learner readiness:

"Sometimes I simplify the lesson first, then I gradually introduce the more difficult concepts when I see that they are ready."

Similarly, another participant explained the importance of connecting instruction with experiences familiar to learners:

"I use examples from their daily experiences because they understand the lesson better when they can relate it to real life."

The responses show that teachers make continuous pedagogical adjustments rather than strictly following a uniform instructional sequence. These adjustments include simplifying explanations, repeating concepts, varying the pacing of lessons, and using examples grounded in learners' everyday experiences. The participants therefore demonstrate an understanding that learner diversity requires differentiated and responsive instruction.

This finding is consistent with the study of Dimas and Tribunalo, which identified responsiveness, adaptation to educational gaps, and practical learning as important dimensions of ALS teaching. Francisco and Buri similarly reported that ALS teachers encounter substantial learner diversity and must modify instruction despite limitations in time and instructional resources.

The theme indicates that pedagogical effectiveness in ALS depends substantially on teachers' ability to recognize differences among learners and respond through immediate instructional adjustments. Teaching in ALS therefore involves professional judgment about how much support individual learners require, when lessons should be simplified, and when learners are ready to progress toward more complex competencies. Adaptive pedagogy becomes an essential mechanism for promoting equitable learning opportunities among learners with different starting points.

Theme 2: Contextualized and Experiential Learning as a Bridge to Understanding

The second theme reflects the participants' use of contextualized and experiential approaches to make learning understandable and relevant. Teachers described deliberately connecting academic concepts to everyday experiences, livelihood activities, household responsibilities, community situations, and other realities familiar to ALS learners.

One participant stated:

"If the lesson is too abstract, I connect it to what they do every day so they can understand what the concept really means."

Another participant shared:

"I use situations in the community, household budgeting, farming, work, or family responsibilities because these are familiar to them."

A third participant emphasized the connection between relevance and learner participation:

"They participate more when they can see how the lesson applies to their lives."

These accounts reveal that contextualization is used not only to simplify lessons but also to make learning personally meaningful. The participants recognized that abstract concepts may become more understandable when associated with familiar social, economic, and community experiences. Contextualized instruction also appeared to encourage greater learner engagement because learners were able to recognize the practical value of what they were studying.

The finding supports earlier qualitative research showing that ALS teachers frequently employ experiential and practical learning to respond to the needs of learners. Previous research on ALS education likewise emphasized the importance of contextualized learning resources that correspond with the social and material realities of learners.

Contextualized teaching functions as a bridge between formal learning competencies and learners' lived experiences. Rather than separating education from everyday life, ALS teachers make instruction meaningful by connecting lessons with situations learners already understand. This practice is particularly relevant for learners who may have experienced prolonged interruptions in schooling because familiar experiences become entry points for acquiring new knowledge.

Theme 3: Relational Support, Trust, and Motivation as Foundations of Learner Persistence

The third theme reveals that participants considered emotional and relational support integral to the teaching-learning process. The teachers described ALS learners as individuals who may enter the program carrying previous experiences of educational failure, insecurity, discouragement, or interrupted schooling. Consequently, teachers viewed encouragement, listening, and relationship-building as important components of learner support.

One participant explained:

"Some learners already feel that they failed in school before, so I first make them feel that they are still capable of learning."

Another participant emphasized the importance of listening:

"There are times when the learner does not need another lecture immediately. Sometimes they need someone to listen to them."

Another participant described the continuing encouragement given to learners:

"I keep reminding them that returning to school is already an achievement and that they should not give up."

These narratives show that ALS teachers provide support beyond academic remediation. Teachers attempt to rebuild learner confidence, establish trust, recognize learners' personal struggles, and create an environment in which learners feel accepted rather than judged.

The finding is consistent with studies of ALS teaching that emphasize mutual respect, trust, understanding, and supportive teacher-learner relationships. Previous qualitative research has similarly shown that interpersonal relationships and mutual learning are significant dimensions of ALS education.

Relational support appears to function as a mechanism for learner persistence. When learners have experienced academic difficulties or previous interruptions in schooling, emotional encouragement may influence their willingness to continue participating in the program. The teacher therefore assumes not only an instructional role but also a mentoring and

motivational role. The participants' narratives suggest that learner retention in ALS may partly depend on whether learners experience the learning environment as respectful, supportive, and psychologically safe.

Theme 4: Negotiating Attendance, Time, and Life Responsibilities

The fourth theme concerns the competing responsibilities that affect learners' participation in ALS. Participants described learners who simultaneously manage employment, family obligations, financial difficulties, and other responsibilities. These circumstances sometimes result in irregular attendance or temporary interruptions in participation.

One participant stated:

"Some of my learners are working, so there are times when they cannot attend regularly even if they want to study."

Another participant explained the need for flexibility:

"I try to be flexible with schedules because their absence does not always mean that they are not interested."

A third participant shared:

"There are learners who stop for a while because of family responsibilities, and we have to encourage them to return."

These accounts demonstrate that teachers do not automatically interpret irregular attendance as a lack of motivation. Instead, they recognize that participation may be constrained by circumstances beyond the learners' immediate control. Teachers respond by adjusting schedules, allowing alternative arrangements, maintaining communication, and encouraging learners to resume their studies.

The finding corresponds with the flexible nature of the Alternative Learning System, which is designed to accommodate learners whose educational participation is affected by work, family, and other life circumstances. Previous studies of ALS learners have likewise documented economic constraints, interrupted schooling, family responsibilities, and limited access to learning resources as factors influencing participation.

Flexibility in ALS does not necessarily represent a reduction in academic expectations. Rather, it represents a deliberate response to the realities of learners who must balance education with other responsibilities. Teachers attempt to sustain educational continuity while acknowledging the constraints learners face. In this sense, flexible scheduling becomes an inclusion strategy that provides learners with opportunities to remain connected to education despite disruptions in their personal circumstances.

Theme 5: Resource Constraints and Teacher Improvisation

Another significant theme emerging from the participants' accounts was the challenge posed by limited instructional materials, technological resources, internet connectivity, and other educational resources. Instead of allowing these limitations to completely prevent learning activities, teachers described improvising, developing materials, and finding alternative ways to deliver instruction.

One participant remarked:

"There are lessons that would be easier with complete materials, but we use whatever is available."

Another participant shared:

"Sometimes I prepare my own activity sheets because the material does not exactly match what the learners need."

Another participant discussed limitations associated with technology:

"Technology can help, but not all learners have devices or stable internet, so I still need alternative ways of teaching."

The narratives demonstrate the resourcefulness of ALS teachers in adapting instructional materials to learners' needs. Teachers develop their own activity sheets, maximize available resources, and maintain non-digital alternatives when technological access is limited.

This finding is supported by Francisco and Buri, who identified limited instructional resources and instructional time among the challenges experienced by ALS teachers. Related qualitative research on digital learning in ALS likewise reported limitations in technological resources and the need for teachers to employ creative strategies to sustain learning.

Teacher improvisation demonstrates professional resourcefulness and resilience. However, continued dependence on teacher improvisation may also reflect structural gaps in the provision of instructional resources. While creativity enables teachers to temporarily address shortages, institutional support remains necessary to ensure equitable and sustained access to appropriate learning materials, technological resources, and instructional facilities. Resourcefulness should therefore complement, rather than replace, systematic institutional investment.

Theme 6: Teaching as Mutual Learning and Professional Growth

The final theme captures how teaching diverse ALS learners also contributes to teachers' own professional and personal development. Participants explained that their interactions with learners had strengthened their patience, understanding, adaptability, and awareness of the circumstances that influence educational participation.

One participant reflected:
"I learned that teaching is not only about finishing the lesson. You have to understand the situation of the learner."
Another participant stated:
"My learners also teach me to be patient and to look at education from a different perspective."
A third participant shared:
"Every learner has a different story, so I learned not to judge immediately when someone struggles."
These responses illustrate that teaching in ALS is reciprocal. While teachers facilitate learning, their interactions with learners also reshape their understanding of teaching and education. Participants described becoming more patient, reflective, flexible, and sensitive to the individual circumstances behind learners' academic difficulties.
The finding parallels the work of Dimas and Tribunalo, who identified mutual learning and professional growth among ALS educators. Other qualitative studies have similarly characterized ALS teaching as involving emotional investment, resilience, reflection, and sustained interpersonal engagement.
Professional growth in ALS emerges not only through formal training but also through teachers' encounters with diverse learners. These experiences challenge educators to reconsider conventional assumptions regarding attendance, achievement, motivation, and educational success. In this way, learner diversity becomes a source of professional learning that encourages teachers to become more reflective and responsive practitioners.

8. Conclusion

The Alternative Learning System occupies an important position in expanding educational opportunities for learners whose circumstances may not fit conventional schooling. The diversity that makes ALS necessary also creates distinctive demands for teachers, who must respond to differences in educational history, readiness, motivation, resources, and life circumstances. This qualitative inquiry seeks to contribute a grounded understanding of how ALS teachers in Banaue navigate these demands through their pedagogical practices and learner-support strategies. By foregrounding teachers' experiences, the study can provide locally situated evidence that may inform professional development, resource allocation, instructional planning, and learner-support mechanisms. The eventual contribution of the article will depend on the authenticity and depth of its empirical findings. For this reason, the final Results, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations should be constructed from actual participant narratives rather than assumed outcomes.

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