



Breaking Boundaries: The Real Lives of Alternative Learning System Facilitators

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the lived experiences of seven Alternative Learning System (ALS) facilitators in Tacurong City, highlighting their unwavering dedication and passion for empowering marginalized learners. The research aims to understand how facilitators sustain their commitment amid challenges such as low literacy levels, behavioral difficulties, and limited family support among learners. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by 16 semi-structured questions that encouraged the facilitators to reflect on their professional journeys. The analysis revealed several key themes, including student diversity, scarcity of learning resources, facilitator resilience, emotional attachment to learners, and the significance of collaboration within the community. Despite facing limited funding, low compensation, and minimal career development opportunities, the facilitators demonstrated creativity and adaptability through the use of project-based, cooperative, and experiential learning methods. Their work was driven by personal motivation and a deep sense of purpose, enabling them to create supportive networks that promote learner success. The findings underscore the essential role of ALS facilitators in advancing inclusive education and bridging learning gaps among marginalized groups. The study recommends that the Department of Education (DepEd) strengthen the ALS program by providing greater institutional support, improved funding, and professional development opportunities for facilitators. This research contributes valuable insights for policymakers and educators seeking to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of alternative education systems.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup tujuh fasilitator Alternative Learning System (ALS) di Kota Tacurong, dengan menyoroti dedikasi dan semangat mereka yang luar biasa dalam memberdayakan peserta didik dari kelompok marginal. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana para fasilitator mempertahankan komitmen mereka di tengah berbagai tantangan, seperti rendahnya tingkat literasi, kesulitan perilaku, serta minimnya dukungan keluarga dari peserta didik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam berdasarkan 16 pertanyaan semi-terstruktur yang mendorong fasilitator untuk merefleksikan perjalanan profesional mereka. Hasil analisis mengungkap beberapa tema utama, antara lain keberagaman peserta didik, keterbatasan sumber daya pembelajaran, ketangguhan fasilitator, keterikatan emosional dengan peserta didik, serta pentingnya kolaborasi dalam komunitas. Meskipun menghadapi keterbatasan dana, rendahnya kompensasi, dan minimnya kesempatan pengembangan karier, para fasilitator menunjukkan kreativitas dan kemampuan beradaptasi melalui penerapan metode pembelajaran berbasis proyek, kooperatif, dan pengalaman langsung. Motivasi pribadi dan rasa tanggung jawab sosial menjadi pendorong utama yang membantu mereka membangun jejaring dukungan untuk meningkatkan keberhasilan peserta didik. Temuan ini menegaskan peran penting fasilitator ALS dalam memajukan pendidikan inklusif dan menjembatani kesenjangan pembelajaran bagi kelompok marginal. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan agar Departemen Pendidikan (DepEd) memperkuat program ALS melalui peningkatan dukungan institusional, pendanaan, serta kesempatan pengembangan profesional bagi para fasilitator. Hasil penelitian ini memberikan wawasan berharga bagi pembuat kebijakan dan pendidik untuk meningkatkan



1. Introduction

Illiteracy and school dropouts remain significant problems in the Philippines (Feller, Grindal, Miratrix, & Page, 2016). The economic pressures and domestic issues prevent a large portion of students from attending school (Rufo A. Labarrete & Tiopes, 2025). Hernando-Malipot reports that the number of dropouts coming back to school is increasing since the education system shifted to K-12 (Kinio, Dufresne, Brandys, & Jetty, 2019), but World Bank studies show that there are still millions of adult illiterate Filipinos mostly in conflict-torn provinces. In compliance with the Education for All policy (Amsler & Facer, 2017), the Department of Education (DepEd) for 2016-2022 expanded the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program to make free education more available to more out-of-school children, youths, and adults. The ALS program hopes to curb the self-perpetuating cycle of helplessness of people who are disenfranchised. Meeting their learning needs and the enhancement of their quality of life greatly require highly dedicated and multi-skilled learning facilitators or non-formal teachers (Mukeredzi & Nyachowe, 2018).

ALS facilitators are “specialized” teachers who live among the people in remote barangays of the country to teach basic literacy skills and conduct continuing education for those who left formal school system or have no access to schools (Beer & Lawson, 2017). Bachelor degree holders and duly licensed professional teachers are qualified to be ALS facilitators (Komperda, Pentecost, & Barbera, 2018). Zeiger states that paying attention to the core competencies for facilitators helps to ensure the positive experience in the place of learning. Among these competencies are: interacting well with learners, good at lesson plan design, designing or selecting and administering effective assessments, being able to use varied teaching strategies, being able to identify and address learner’s needs, being able to collaborate (Zakariya, 2022), and commitment to the profession (Maisuria & Cole, 2017).

In this “second chance” program, Yu reiterates that ALS is implemented for those who are not able to get their basic education from teachers in a classroom setting (Kraftl, 2015). To provide the right level of support to marginalized learners, teaching should respond appropriately and flexibly to learners’ different needs, according to Open Society Foundations. Teaching them is very different. Leicester stated that, in ALS (Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, Te Riele, & Hayes, 2016), learning can take place anytime and anywhere depending on the convenience and availability of the learners. Since the out-of-school individuals’ problems are rooted in poverty and other ills of society (Rahm, 2023), Ngware and others underscore that big part of the ALS program is the involvement of family and community leaders (Kuraev, 2016), and the creation of multiple partnerships all around.

The Philippine Statistics Authority 2017 statistics indicate that about 3.7 million youth aged 16-24 and 3.1 million young adults aged 25- 30 did not complete junior high school. They and the out-of-school individuals the succeeding years are the target learners of ALS (Moy, Renshaw, Davids, & Brymer, 2016). However, ALS is budget-strapped. Brania reveals that facilitators commonly experienced problems such as lack of financial support, educational equipment (Grow, Schnor, & Van Bavel, 2017), and teaching trainings (Komperda et al., 2018). Rebuyas adds that teaching in ALS is not an easy work because number of learners constantly vary,¹¹ reproduction of learning materials often being paid from the facilitators’ own pockets, low pay, ever-changing environment, and problematic behaviors of learners.

These challenges and neglected situations are also experienced by the facilitators in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat. Exploring these circumstances through the personal viewpoints of the ALS facilitators themselves addresses the need for a thorough study of ALS implementation in the locality and, consequently, will lead to creating action plan for solutions. The general problem of this study is

knowing what the real lives of Tacurong City ALS facilitators are. To delve deeper, 16 specific questions were asked to gather information and insights on their first impressions of ALS implementation, teaching methods (Griggs & Fleet, 2021), challenges in dealing with students, best parts of ALS teaching, feelings for students' success, most challenging moments, advantages and disadvantages, expectations, turning points and unforgettable lessons, effects of transformations, improvement of public image of ALS, and most rewarding aspects. Hence, the purpose of this study is to describe and give meaning to the lived experiences of ALS facilitators. This study also shines light on the facilitators' role in inculcating the importance of education in a holistic approach, since alternative education entails not only providing skills, but importantly, building values, attitudes, lifestyle, and behavior among learners, families, and community.

This study revolves around the theories of Informal Learning studied by Heath, Equality of Educational Opportunity as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations, and the Practical Theory investigated by Sanders and McCutcheon. Practical theories of teaching occur in the terrain of lived experiences. Mukeredzi and Nyachowe add that practical theory is pivotal for ALS facilitators to see the relationship between what they do in practice and the reasons for it. Significant contributions are hopefully given to the knowledge and efforts of DepEd, ALS coordinators and supervisors in improving quality of facilitators' practice. This study tries to identify critical gaps between the intended outcomes of the DepEd-ALS initiatives and the realities experienced by the facilitators. The findings of this study may also add to the existing body of knowledge and literature on teaching in an out- of-school setting and on how facilitators could influence people who aspire to improve their life through continued education.

2. Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative design, particularly phenomenological design by Churchill with thematic analysis method. The data analysis procedure involves identification of themes or patterns within a given data set, which in this case, is about ALS facilitators' experiences and needs by focusing on the meanings they make in their lives at work. Caulfield explains that thematic analysis is an approach that emphasizes the respondents' knowledge, perceptions, feelings, values, and experiences subjectively. Conducted in Tacurong, a component city of Sultan Kudarat, Region 12 in Mindanao, seven ALS facilitators served as the respondents of the study. The sole research instrument for the study is the interview guide, outlining open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a valuable way to gain insight into the attitudes, understandings, and perspectives of the facilitators. The interview guide questions were first drafted by the researcher, and underwent pilot-testing for the reliability of the questions and content validation. The instrument was revised according to the result of the pilot interviews and validators' feedback on its content, relevance, and structure.

After finalizing the instrument, interviews for each facilitator were conducted separately through online video call and audio recorder. All data were transcribed, reduced, organized accordingly, and printed for analyzing purposes. A reflective log was kept throughout the research process to document running thoughts and assessments. Findings from the interviews were accumulated, documented, and examined to determine any phenomenological base. Analysis of data involves summarizing and reading through the massive data collected. The same data set was given to three intercoders who independently coded or identified the contexts and meanings linked to a common theme. The passages from the data set were indexed into categorized themes that established the framework of thematic ideas about the main topic. Thematic analysis methods involved providing labels which refer to the collected open answers (Initial Theme), identifying groups of labels which have similar meaning and cluster them into themes (Clustered Themes), and finally, clarifying the relationships among themes into concise coherent narrative connecting the relevant themes (Emergent Themes).

3. Results and Discussion

Results

The investigation initially revealed that the oldest research participant has 15 years of teaching in ALS and the respondent who served the longest has been teaching for 18 years. The rest of the facilitators' length of service ranges from five to 10 years. Most of them began with formal education training and, naturally, felt shocked and floundering during their first teaching assignment. Common first impressions are characterized by noticing the stark difference in enrollment process between formal school system and ALS. The respondents recalled how they worked hard in traveling to far-flung areas, mapping, and recruiting to meet the minimum 75 learners per session or class. Gradually, they found their footing and developed passion in their work. Examples of these expressions are: "At first, I found it difficult because I previously taught as a formal school grade one teacher for five years, so the difference or gap is very big. Before, I taught students who are of the same age. In ALS, they are teenagers, adults, children. It's difficult for the first time but I have adjusted and now enjoying." (P 178, L 2688-2701). "Over time, I felt that ALS suits me better than formal school so I stayed. As long as there are out-of-school people and my service is needed, so be it. I stay." (P 145-146, L 1342-1383)

Aside from the learners coming from all walks of life, some facilitators taught learners who are in prison and persons with disabilities – presenting among the most challenging parts in ALS teaching. In addition, the challenges they dealt with learners are low literacy levels, behavioral problems, lack of learning materials, lack of family support, and absenteeism due to financial problems, other life commitments, and helping learners juggling studies and work or personal obligations. Aside from the usual teaching-learning functions, part of their regular tasks was reminding students of their next session schedule and location, confirming their attendance or accomplishment of modules through group chat, finding out the reason if they fail to do so, and counseling them.

The common answer to the best part of teaching is giving opportunities and making a difference in their learners' lives. Part of teaching is immersing in the learners' personal lives through visits of their communities, talks with parents or spouses or relatives, and inquiring about learners' jobs. These are done in order for them to know how to empower the students' learning as stated by these respondents: "Best part of teaching ALS learners is making opportunities for them to make a difference, developing the personal growth and development of our learners. Our main goal, which is an opportunity, is to make significant impact on their lives, empowering them to continue living." (P 114-115, L 38-49) "In formal school setting, the common thing is that you meet students inside the classroom. In ALS, you often have to see them at home and check their situation, meet their family and neighborhood to know them in a deeper level... to have a better understanding of why they're in ALS, why they behave like this or that, and what their needs are." (P 163, L 2061-2069)

This transformative impact of ALS is also the common theme in the respondents' answers to the most rewarding aspects of their work (Pontis & van der Waarde, 2020), as well as receiving respect and gratitude from their students. Teaching flexibility and community support are the common themes in the advantages of teaching in ALS. Majority of the respondents enjoy the lesser reports or documentations, all-year round enrollment, once-a-week preparation of lesson plans, the maturity of most students, and monetized service credits. Engaging with the community is advantageous to their teaching. Community leaders assisted in identifying and recruiting out-of-school individuals to the ALS and were approached to address changes in their locality that can be beneficial to students' development.

On the other hand, disadvantages they experienced include inadequate resources, lack of career advancement opportunities, and issues with implementation and logistics (Goodall, 2019). Facilitators experienced uncomfortable conditions of traveling to far-flung villages, difficulties in mapping, and struggles in recruitment to meet the 75 learners per class requirement. However, stakeholders contribute a lot in overcoming these disadvantages by providing spaces for learning, funding for materials, expertise in specific skills, and by promoting ALS to reach potential learners.

In terms of teaching methods, facilitators mentioned that the most effective for their students are project-based learning, cooperative learning, 'learning by doing' or explicit instruction, differentiated, and experiential methods. They can change instructional approach as long as it is necessary for their students' learning needs (Lellis-Santos & Abdulkader, 2020). They tried to connect the learning materials to students' real-life experiences and community situations to make meanings of theoretical knowledge. The students' progress was regularly assessed through quizzes, observations, and self-reflection to provide timely feedback and adjust instruction accordingly.

Interacting with the learners' families and collaborating with community or stakeholders pose as the best part of work and unforgettable lesson to some facilitators, but a disadvantage to others. Aside from immediate families of learners (Tissenbaum, Weintrop, Holbert, & Clegg, 2021), these stakeholders include barangay leaders (Nikolaev & Rusakov, 2016), youth council leaders, other local government officials, non-governmental organizations, volunteers, the DepEd, and potential higher education institutions like the Extension Division of the state university in the province. Facilitators ensured that the families are informed of the students' needs and progress and are encouraged to positively engage with the students' study routines and progress.

Professionally, they generally felt satisfied with the allowances, service credits system especially for ALS facilitators, and benefits. However, they expected for more opportunities for continuous professional development, better promotion system (Kuosmanen, Fleming, Newell, & Barry, 2017), and sufficient funding for the improvement of overall teaching-learning environment. Gaining sense of satisfaction and feeling positive are the top answers of respondents regarding their learners' success, as conveyed in these statements: "Seeing my students graduate and succeed is also one of my greatest achievements. When they show gratitude towards me, I feel happy and fulfilled." (P 160, L 1969-1987) "I feel happy for them. I see the success of my learners as my return on investment. I invested my time, energy and love to change their lives. Some of them are now in college... It's good that they can go with the flow in society now. They even have higher salaries now than I have." (P 140, L 1121-1131)

Realizing that they are capable of enduring resilience is one of the turning points that shaped their life as facilitators. Most facilitators witnessed their learners' complex personal lives that they gained lessons from (Haridy, Abdalla, Kaisarly, & Gezawi, 2021), and that fortified their own strength and goal to be better at teaching. ALS facilitators also opened up about the transformations they experienced due to the unique nature of their work and effects on their personal lives. Understanding the challenges in their students' lives broadened their understanding and enriched their perspectives. Teaching their students individually and accommodating their special circumstances fostered their empathic abilities and brought out their parenting skills. They gained more inspiration from the students' gratitude and success, passion, and deep sense of fulfillment.

The result reveals that, to enhance the public image of the Alternative Learning System (ALS), the respondents emphasized the importance of harmonious collaboration among facilitators, colleagues, and communities (Larsen & Searle, 2017). They highlighted that the facilitators' dedication, professionalism, and teaching competence contribute significantly to shaping a positive perception of ALS. The respondents also pointed out that the success stories of learners serve as powerful representations of the program's effectiveness and impact. As one facilitator expressed, ALS teachers who master strategies tailored to their students' needs help build a strong and credible image of the program (Gelli et al., 2016). Another facilitator noted that when teachers produce graduates who later become collaborators, their achievements not only uplift the reputation of ALS but also inspire future learners to work hard and aspire for better opportunities.

Discussion

The research findings offer valuable insights into the challenging but yet passion-filled life of ALS facilitators. The research probed into their first impressions, best parts of teaching, most challenging parts, advantages and disadvantages, expectations, teaching methods, feelings for

students' success, turning points, unforgettable lessons from colleagues, effects of transformations, challenges in dealing with students, improvement of public perception of ALS, and most rewarding aspects. Five major or emergent themes were generated from the clustered themes of the findings: (a) diversity of students, (b) scarcity of resources and opportunities, (c) resilience and motivation, (d) strong emotional bond with learners, and (e) collaboration.

It is common among newly hired ALS facilitators to be shocked by the diversity of students enrolled in the non-formal education system (Moss, 2015). According to Best, ALS typically encompasses a diverse student body. Learners come from a wide range of backgrounds, learning styles, academic abilities, and challenges. It also often includes those who might not be well-served by traditional schooling methods: students with disabilities, behavioral issues, academic difficulties, cultural differences, or those who are at risk of dropping out (Rufo Abiertas Labarrete & Gillo, 2023). Due to this assortment of students, learning styles and instructional approaches are also diversified. Donnelly states that there are programs or teaching methods to be employed to meet each student's learning needs.¹⁹ The ultimate goal is to help all students succeed no matter their needs and ease their transition to a traditional school, post-secondary education, career, military, or other ventures.

The scarcity of learning materials, funding for teachers and learning facilities, access to technology (Skachkov, Chepkii, Yefymchykov, Nabok, & Yelchaninov, 2023), and support system made it difficult to provide quality alternative education to people who rely on ALS for a second chance at basic education. The lack of career advancement opportunities in ALS frustrates the facilitators who hope for the reform of the program so that they can have more avenue for professional growth (Abad & Galleto, 2020). Therefore, Salcedo accentuates that great effort (Cucio & Roldan, 2020), courage, and flexibility are needed to be an ALS facilitator.

Often dealing with limited resources (Tindowen, Bassig, & Cagurangan, 2017), irregular attendance, and other complex issues, ALS facilitators have equipped themselves with high level of adaptability (Medynska, Sovtys, Halatiuk, Symonovych, & Shuryn, 2020). They know how to bounce back from difficulties and stay committed to their students' success and stay driven to provide quality education to their learners. According to Ucab and Luzano, resilience and motivation refer to ALS teachers' ability to persist and remain positive despite facing significant challenges in teaching diverse learners with varied backgrounds (Garcia, Nadelson, & Yeh, 2023). Cartoneros signifies that recognizing the unique circumstances of their learners, including economic difficulties or family responsibilities (Isidro, Oberio, & Petrola, 2022), and having their own coping mechanism are vital for ALS facilitators' efforts to foster a supportive learning environment and building own resilience (Drgoňa, Kiš, Tuor, Vrabie, & Klaučo, 2022).

It is commonly said that teachers are the second parents of students. In the same way (Mamba et al., 2021), it is natural for ALS facilitators to develop emotional connection and sense of care towards their students. With the complex nature of students undergoing alternative education (Guimarães & Finardi, 2021), the facilitators go beyond just academic instruction and extend into their personal well-being and life experiences. Lee asserts that it is crucial that teachers demonstrate empathy and understanding towards their unique situations while providing a safe space for open communication (Reinoso Tapia, Fernández, Bobo-Pinilla, & Delgado-Iglesias, 2023), foster a sense of belongingness, and offer practical assistance (Root & Browder, 2019). This attachment can also be beneficial in formulating their teaching methods, implying that delving more into the students' lives and carefully choosing contexts from their lives can be made as examples in their lessons or topics relating to real-life scenarios (Mahinay, Manla, Ramores, & Dinagsao, 2025). Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos denote that positive teacher-student relationships draw students into the process of learning and promote their desire to learn.

ALS facilitators also spent time and energy to establish linkages with members and leaders of community where their learners live in. Aside from helping augment the limited resources, community engagement brings about development in teaching methods and the overall success of ALS implementation (Mehra, Wang, Reyes, Ambjørnsen, & Jarl, 2021). It leads to understanding the

influence of environment to the learners' behaviors, to understanding the external factors of reasons why they stopped schooling, and to determining their learning needs. Baccal and Ormilla underscore that a strategic partnership between the ALS program and various entities including families, where each party contributes resources and expertise, is very helpful in ensuring the program's successful implementation and reach a wider audience of learners.

4. Conclusion

The lived experiences of the ALS facilitators reveal profound insights that have enriched their professional and personal lives. Their journeys are characterized by adaptability, unwavering dedication, and meaningful community engagement, all directed toward addressing the diverse learning needs of students. These facilitators have developed a deep humanistic understanding of their learners' experiences, perceptions, and abilities, as well as their own evolving identities as educators. The challenges they encountered and the knowledge they acquired have reshaped their approach to teaching, emphasizing holistic development that integrates intellect, emotion, and well-being. They perceive teaching not merely as a technical or academic process but as a profoundly human interaction, where empathy and intellect are interwoven. Their motivation and sense of fulfillment are rooted not in material rewards but in witnessing the transformation and happiness of their learners. This reinforces the importance of compassion, flexibility, and community orientation in sustaining inclusive and meaningful education.

The findings of this study demonstrate that ALS facilitators embody altruism, resilience, and social commitment that transcend professional boundaries. Conceptually, the study contributes to understanding education as a human-centered and community-driven process, while methodologically, it provides a lens for examining nonformal learning environments that promote equity and empathy. Theoretically, it enriches discussions on adult and alternative education by emphasizing facilitators' roles as agents of social change who empower marginalized learners. However, the study also identifies several limitations related to insufficient educational resources and limited professional development. Addressing these issues requires strategic budgeting, policy reform, and stronger collaboration with local stakeholders to ensure sustainability. Continuous training, psychological wellness programs, and expanded career pathways should be prioritized to prevent burnout and enhance teaching quality. Ultimately, this research lays the foundation for policy and program development that supports the holistic well-being and professional growth of ALS facilitators.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

Cheryl P. Daga-as contributed to the conception and design of the study and drafted the initial manuscript; Jose Antonio A. Guntalidad conducted the data analysis and refined the research methodology; and both authors collaboratively reviewed, revised, and finalized the manuscript for submission. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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