

# Recognizing the Status, Needs, and Challenges of Alternative Learning System Students in a Rural District

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## Abstract

The act of dropping out of school has significant implications for students, limiting their opportunities for further education and job prospects, often resulting in low-skilled employment and reduced wages. To address this issue, the Philippine government has established the Philippine Alternative Learning System (ALS), a parallel learning system aimed at providing a second chance for out-of-school youth and adults. However, despite recent progress, the ALS continues to face persistent challenges that are further complicated by the diverse settings of its learners. This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the current conditions of ALS students by determining their status, needs, and challenges, with the objective of addressing their unique circumstances. The study includes a voluntary survey questionnaire administered to learner respondents, supplemented by in-depth interview with key informants such as school district supervisors, school principals, and ALS teachers. By objectively describing the participants' experiences, this research provides valuable insights into the prevailing issues and concerns, serving as a foundation for the development of an effective support system to empower ALS learners.

**Keywords:** Philippine Alternative Learning System, Status, Needs, Challenges

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented the Philippine Alternative Learning System (ALS) as a parallel educational pathway for youth and adults who have not completed formal basic education. ALS specifically targets individuals who possess literacy skills but have not finished basic education. According to Arzadon (2015), the ALS program combines non-formal education with accreditation and equivalency (A&E) tests, providing learners the opportunity to earn elementary or high school diplomas. This approach serves as an alternative for those unable to attend or complete traditional schooling (Arzadon, 2015). Stakeholders, including teachers and government officials, generally view the ALS program in a positive light (Baccal, 2021). Research conducted by Mehra (2021) highlights the significant benefits of ALS as a worthwhile investment for economically disadvantaged young individuals, leading to increased educational attainment and empowerment of youth. However, Tindowen (2017) discovered that ALS learners exhibit a limited acquisition of fundamental literacy, which are crucial for success in the globalized world. Consequently, this study aims to shed light on the condition of Alternative Learning System students in one of the islands in Camotes, Cebu, Philippines. The study explores the students' conditions by assessing their status, identify their needs, and examine the challenges they face, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the ALS program in this particular context.

### 1.1 The Philippine Alternative Learning System

The Philippines Alternative Learning System (ALS) is a viable second chance program that will benefit the last, the least and the lost human capital. It is an educational pathway that runs parallel to traditional schooling, offering out-of-school youth and adult learners the chance to acquire necessary experiences and access alternative routes to complete their basic education. This program equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to pass the national Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) exam, which provides an academic credential equivalent to formal school's diplomas in the elementary and junior high school education. Attaining this credential equips ALS participants with the eligibility to apply for higher education and training institutions, as well as to seek employment opportunities that require a high school education. On 2019, the DepEd issued the DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2019 or the Guidelines on the Implementation of the Enhanced Alternative Learning System 2.0 to set the provisions in ensuring strategic, efficient, effective management and implementation. On the other hand, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued CMO No. 10, s. 2018 which guided public and private HEIs in admitting ALS completers.

The ALS has made substantial progress toward its objectives, especially in recent years, yet it faces several persistent challenges. Labarrete (2019) found that ALS learners face challenges in reading comprehension and study skills. The diverse circumstances of ALS learners further complicate the implementation and outreach

efforts of the program. ALS teachers, both in rural and urban areas, have shared similar experiences and have proposed improvements such as increased funding for quality learning materials and the establishment of more learning centers (Borela, 2020).

## 2. Status of the Alternative Learning System Students

The Municipality of San Francisco is a third class municipality in the province of Cebu, Philippines, and is a home to a population of 59, 236 as recorded in the recent census. At present, the District of San Francisco under the guidance of DepEd Cebu Province has an identified ALS Learning Centers which caters 328 out of school youth and adults. There are nine (9) identified Learning Centers in the district, among these centers, three are located within formal school settings, namely San Francisco Central School and SPED Center, San Isidro Elementary School, and Campo Integrated School. The remaining six learning centers are community-based, situated in the barangay hall or covered court of Cabonga, Sonog, Santiago, Montealegre, Union, and Western Poblacion. There are three ALS teachers who oversee the guidance and welfare of the students. The ALS teachers travel to the designated Barangay Learning Centers to deliver subject content. The agreed-upon learning sessions between the learners and facilitators occur twice a week. As a result, only eight hours per week are allocated for classroom instruction. It is important to note that the allocation of time in instruction can impact student learning, although this relationship is influenced by various factors (Gromada et al., 2016; Dunlosky & Ariel, 2011).

### 2.1 Profile of the Respondents

The holistic and grounded understanding of the profile and experiences of the ALS Learners were anchored from the responses of the twenty five (25) alternative learning students who voluntarily answered the Community Needs Assessment Questionnaire. The demographic profile of the respondents are relatively varied. Regarding age distribution, 72% of the individuals are aged 21 and below, while 28% fall within the age range of 22-45. There are no individuals aged 46 and above in the dataset. In terms of gender, 64% of the individuals are male, while 36% are female. Regarding civil status, the majority (88%) of the individuals are single, while only 12% are married. There are no individuals classified as widowed or separated in the dataset. In terms of religion, 84% of the individuals identify as Roman Catholic, 12% as Iglesia ni Kristo, and 4% as Born Again. There are no individuals representing the Seventh Day Adventist religion. Regarding educational attainment, 24% of these learners have not completed elementary education, while 76% have not completed secondary education. The dataset also provides information on family members. The majority of the individuals (36%) come from families with 7-8 members, followed by 32% from families with 9 or more members. Only a small percentage (4-16%) come from families with 1-6 members. Regarding livelihood and source of income, 16% of the individuals are engaged in fishing, 12% in farming, 12% as fish vendors, and a significant portion (60%) do not have any specified source of income. Lastly, the data shows that 84% of the families have a monthly income of 4,000 Philippine Peso or below, while the remaining percentages (4-8%) fall into higher income brackets.

Consequently, it is evident from the aforesaid data that the respondents belong to the disadvantaged marginalized sectors of the Philippine Society as indicated through their educational attainment, number of family member, livelihood, and family monthly income (PSA Board, s. 2017). Considering the age of the respondents, majority are youth, which refers to persons fifteen (15) to thirty (30) years old (RA 8044, Youth in Nation Building Act). Lastly, based on the SDG Indicator on poverty, the respondents are rural poor who fall below the official poverty threshold (RA 8425). Desai (2019) found that financial difficulties were a reason for leaving school while the gender revealed that most ALS students are male, the latter are more likely to drop out from school. In many countries, boys repeat grades more than girls and are at greater risk of failing to complete their education and dropping out. Khan (2022) found that the rate of dropout for boys in primary and secondary classes was higher than that of girls.

### 2.2 Reasons to Study in the Alternative Learning System

For students, the completion of secondary school holds immense importance as it serves as a vital stepping stone towards higher education institutions, technical and vocational training programs, and formal-sector employment opportunities. However, individuals who fail to complete their secondary education often encounter restricted avenues for the development and utilization of their human capital. Upon asking the respondents' motivations and aspirations in pursuing education through the Alternative Learning System, the following themes were identified, such as (1) career aspirations and opportunities; (2) personal goals and achievement; (3) future and family; and (4) education and learning.

This implies that ALS learners express a desire to improve their career prospects and create better opportunities for themselves. They recognize the importance of education in securing employment and advancing in their chosen fields. Zhong-chang and Chen (2007) both analyzed the relationship between education and employment and found that the development of education is beneficial to the increase in the

employment rate, and the development of higher education creates positive effects on employment.

In addition, the respondents are driven by personal goals and a sense of achievement. They see education as a means to develop themselves personally, acquire new knowledge and skills, and fulfill their individual potential. ALS learners are also motivated by their future and the well-being of their families. They understand that education can lead to a better future for themselves and their loved ones, providing them with improved financial stability and quality of life. Kołodziej (2010) highlighted the role of achievement motivation in educational aspirations and performance, suggesting that it is an important predictor of future success or failure. The respondents value education and have a genuine thirst for learning. They recognize that education goes beyond acquiring a diploma or certificate, and they express a desire to expand their knowledge and capabilities in various subjects. Ajay (2016) emphasized that education is a continuous process that begins at birth and continues throughout life.

### 3. Needs of the Alternative Learning System Students

Although reducing the dropout rate remains a primary objective for the Philippine Government, there is still significant room for enhancing the educational and employment prospects of individuals who have already discontinued their education but are eager to resume and complete their studies. This study found that these students possess a strong desire to pursue further education and acquire additional skills. The absence of their involvement in previous seminars and training programs highlights the need for opportunities to expand their knowledge and capabilities. The reasons behind their pursuit of further training encompass economic aspirations, recreational interests, and a genuine thirst for educational growth. Notably, the field of education garners significant interest among the respondents, indicating a desire to enhance their learning abilities. Moreover, there is a clear inclination towards practical life skills, showcasing their recognition of the importance of real-world competencies. The findings suggest that ALS students yearn for training programs that encompass a range of subjects, such as grammar, problem-solving, and digital literacy. Gauly (2019) found that participation in training is related to higher literacy skills.

By acknowledging these needs and tailoring training initiatives accordingly, educational institutions and policymakers can empower ALS students to overcome learning barriers, improve their income prospects, and equip themselves for a brighter future. According to the teacher *“they need life skills training so that if they are unable to continue to Senior High School or College, they have knowledge that can be utilized to find decent livelihood opportunities”*. Out of school youth need life skills education to navigate the challenges of everyday life and to become healthy, responsible, and productive adults. Dinesh (2014) argues that life skills education can help students overcome the lags created by the education system. Pellegrino (2017) emphasizes the importance of developing transferable knowledge and skills, including problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-management. Rao (2011) further added that life skills programs should be an integral part of the education system to help young people develop negotiation, conflict resolution, and decision making.

### 4. Challenges of the Alternative Learning System Students

The challenges mentioned by the respondents include difficulties in math, lack of financial resources, transportation issues, family responsibilities, health concerns, and the need to work. Financial challenges emerged as the most common obstacle mentioned, reflecting the significance of economic constraints in the respondents' education journey. Usman (2019) found that financial stress leads to lower grades and students who worry about money have poorer academic performance. Noor (2007) discovered that adult learners encounter various obstacles, including conflicting responsibilities, time constraints, and financial limitations, lack of concentration, diminished confidence, and inconvenient schedules. These challenges were found to affect adult learners who had multiple roles, and the challenges subsequently became barriers to learning. ALS program faces challenges in terms of funding, teacher training, and the need for more flexible learning options (Arzadon, 2015).

### 5. Conclusion and Limitation

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Municipality of San Francisco, Cebu, Philippines, serves as a vital educational pathway for out-of-school youth and adults who have not completed formal basic education. Despite its positive impact on learners' lives, ALS continues to face untiring challenges. Adult learners encounter obstacles such as conflicting responsibilities, time constraints, and financial limitations, lack of concentration, diminished confidence, and inconvenient schedules. The profile of the respondents reveals that poverty and social factors contribute to school dropouts, highlighting the need for interventions to address these issues. Motivations for studying in the ALS include career aspirations, personal goals, future prospects, and the desire for education and learning. The needs of ALS students encompass the desire for further training and seminars, particularly in areas such as economic advancement, recreation, and educational growth. Practical life skills and a strong interest in education and digital literacy were also evident. Financial constraints, transportation issues,

and family responsibilities were identified as the primary challenges faced by ALS learners. By addressing these challenges and providing tailored training programs, policymakers and educational institutions can empower ALS students, improve their income prospects, and equip them with the necessary skills for a better future. On the other hand, this study acknowledges its limitations such as sample size and selection, limited perspective and external factors. Hence, is subject for another investigations and further research.

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