

**JOURNEYING INTO THE LIVES OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN SAMAR'S ALTERNATIVE
LEARNING SYSTEM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH****DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.16193261****Darwin M. Macalalad**Special Education Teacher, Bering Strait School District, Alaska, United States of America
dharmacalalad1987@gmail.com**Abstract**

This study assesses the lived experiences of learners with disabilities participating in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) within Samar Division, Philippines. Addressing the scarcity of research on this marginalized population, particularly in rural settings, the study seeks to shed light on their distinct educational challenges, motivations, and future aspirations. Utilizing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, data were collected from five purposively selected participants through in-depth semi-structured interviews, arts-based techniques, and document analysis. This triangulated methodology provided a comprehensive understanding of their educational journeys, revealing systemic obstacles such as insufficient teacher preparation, scarce inclusive resources, social stigma, and bullying that impede both academic progress and social inclusion. Findings indicate that despite encountering substantial difficulties—including transportation barriers, financial limitations, and societal discrimination—these learners exhibited notable resilience and adaptability. Participants expressed appreciation for the ALS's flexible and supportive framework, which fostered self-confidence, allowed individualized pacing, and enabled them to accomplish key milestones such as equivalency exam success and transitions to further education or employment. The critical influence of customized support from educators, families, and communities was emphasized as essential to their achievements. Participants further advocated for enhancements, including comprehensive professional development on inclusive education, creation of accessible learning materials, anti-bullying programs, and increased public awareness to reduce stigma. The study concludes that while ALS provides an essential educational avenue empowering learners with disabilities, systemic improvements are imperative to fully achieve inclusive education goals. By centering the voices of these learners, this research offers valuable guidance for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in developing effective strategies and policies that advance equity, social inclusion, and academic success. Ultimately, the findings call for a unified commitment to fostering an educational environment where learners with disabilities receive the support and opportunities necessary to thrive.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System (ALS), Learners with Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Narrative Inquiry, Social Inclusion

Introduction

Despite international efforts to advance inclusive education, learners with disabilities continue to face substantial obstacles in obtaining quality education and achieving equitable outcomes. In the Philippine context, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as a critical educational pathway for marginalized groups, including learners with disabilities, particularly in remote and underserved areas such as Samar. However, the experiences of these learners within the ALS remain insufficiently studied, especially in terms of the challenges they encounter and the societal attitudes that influence their educational journeys. This study employs a narrative inquiry approach to explore the lived experiences of learners with disabilities enrolled in the ALS program in Samar, focusing on their educational challenges, available support systems, and the societal perceptions that impact their academic and social integration.

A key focus of this research is the transitional period from the ALS to further education or employment, a phase often marked by limited resources, inadequate accommodations, and persistent stigma. While existing literature highlights disparities in educational achievement and employment opportunities between individuals with and without disabilities (Gordon & Rosenblum, 2021; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2020), there is a notable lack of research addressing the transition experiences of ALS learners with disabilities in rural settings. By capturing and analyzing the narratives of these learners, this study aims to shed light on their resilience and aspirations, while identifying both systemic barriers and effective practices within the ALS framework. The findings intend to inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in developing targeted interventions that promote a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, ultimately fostering academic success and meaningful societal participation for learners with disabilities.

Literature Review***Implementation, Challenges, and Effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System for Learners with Disabilities***

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines constitutes a critical educational framework aimed at delivering flexible and inclusive learning opportunities to marginalized groups, notably out-of-school youth, adults, and learners with disabilities. Extant research highlights ALS as a response to the educational challenges introduced by globalization, rapid technological developments, and various socio-economic impediments that hinder access to formal schooling (Caingcoy, Pacursa, & Adajar, 2021; Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2020).

The ALS program, under the auspices of the Department of Education, provides a versatile instructional model that accommodates the diverse needs of learners through multiple delivery modes, including face-to-face sessions, modular learning, and online platforms—a flexibility that proved indispensable during the COVID-19 pandemic (Banzon, 2022). Nevertheless, disparities in access to technology and limited resources continue to disproportionately impact learners residing in isolated and underserved localities (Reyes, 2023). Furthermore, the effective enactment of ALS is impeded by the insufficient preparation of educators, many of whom lack specialized training necessary to address the unique learning requirements and disabilities of their students (Santos et al., 2022).

Aligned with the Philippine government's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, ALS plays a pivotal role in advancing educational equity by offering second-chance learning pathways and empowering vulnerable populations, including Indigenous communities, women, and persons with disabilities (Garcia, 2023; Doronila, 2020; Raywid, 2022; Valk, 2023). The ALS 2.0 Strategic Roadmap, along with its robust monitoring mechanisms, ensures the provision of quality education and targeted learner support, particularly for those with disabilities, through clearly defined performance metrics and continuous feedback processes (Baccal & Ormilla, 2021).

Within the context of the Samar Division, ALS continues to serve thousands of learners through programs focused on functional literacy and vocational skills development (ALS Samar Division Accomplishment Report, 2020; Pascual et al., 2022). The program's inherent flexibility is crucial in addressing obstacles such as geographic isolation and societal stigma, thereby promoting inclusion and fostering the personal growth of learners with disabilities (DepEd Undersecretary Malaluan, 2020).

Empirical studies further reveal that ALS not only advances academic achievement but also cultivates social competencies and autonomy among learners with disabilities by employing individualized instructional strategies and integrating assistive technologies (Santos & Cruz, 2022; Garcia et al., 2023). The engagement of community stakeholders is instrumental in sustaining these initiatives by mobilizing resources and delivering comprehensive support services (Lim & Tan, 2024).

Despite these positive outcomes, significant challenges persist, including the scarcity of accessible learning materials, inadequate professional development in inclusive pedagogy, social marginalization of learners with disabilities, and insufficient technological infrastructure (Cruz, 2021; Santos et al., 2022; Torres, 2024; Villanueva, 2025). Addressing these multifaceted issues necessitates a holistic approach that considers the complex interplay of socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing learners' educational experiences (Garcia, 2023).

Illustrative success stories, such as those of Joy Anne in the Philippines and Sarah in the United States, exemplify the transformative impact of ALS and comparable alternative education programs when adapted to individual learner needs. These cases underscore the critical importance of personalized instruction, advocacy efforts, and community involvement in surmounting barriers and promoting learner empowerment (DepEd Philippines, 2021; International Dyslexia Association, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the lived experiences of learners with disabilities within the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Qualitative methodologies are well-suited for capturing rich, detailed personal narratives and for gaining deeper insights into the obstacles and achievements encountered by these learners (Aspers, 2020; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020). Specifically, a narrative inquiry approach was selected to elicit learners' stories in a manner that foregrounds the emotional and social dimensions of their educational trajectories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020). To further enhance the depth of data, arts-based methods were incorporated, offering additional perspectives that extend beyond verbal articulation. The study is theoretically anchored in humanism, emphasizing the intrinsic worth of individual experiences and the agency of the learners. This philosophical stance enabled the highlighting of learner resilience and their active role in advancing inclusive education (Maryati, 2024; Smith & Jones, 2023; Taylor, 2022).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select five participants with disabilities enrolled in the ALS program within the Samar Division. Inclusion criteria encompassed individuals aged between 18 and 50 years, current or former ALS

learners, and those diagnosed with disabilities as classified by the DSM-5, including autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, or emotional disturbances. Participants were required to be residents of Samar Division and to have demonstrated successful educational transitions coupled with compelling personal narratives.

Data Collection Instruments

A multi-method data collection strategy was adopted, integrating semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and arts-based expressions complemented by participant self-reflections. Semi-structured interviews facilitated the elicitation of comprehensive and nuanced educational narratives within a flexible conversational format. Document analysis of relevant policies and educational materials provided essential contextual grounding, enriching the interpretive framework. The arts-based components allowed participants to convey complex emotional and experiential dimensions through creative modalities, thereby supplementing verbal data with richer, embodied insights. Triangulation of these diverse data sources enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, enabling a holistic understanding of the learners' experiences within ALS. This integrative approach supported the development of evidence-informed recommendations aimed at strengthening inclusive education practices for learners with disabilities.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through a carefully structured process combining semi-structured interviews and arts-based activities to explore the educational experiences of learners with disabilities in the Samar Division's ALS program. Participants were recruited through purposive, non-probability sampling. Interviews were primarily conducted via Zoom to ensure accessibility and comfort, with sessions audio-recorded to guarantee precise data capture. Complementary to the interviews, participants engaged in arts-based tasks, such as creating visual artworks and composing reflective narratives, enabling diverse expressions of their lived experiences. Ethical considerations were rigorously adhered to, including obtaining formal permissions from ALS center administrators and securing parental consent where applicable. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized throughout the process. Transcribed data were subjected to triangulation to enhance analytical rigor and produce a comprehensive depiction of learners' educational journeys within the ALS framework.

Data Analysis

A systematic qualitative data analysis was performed to elucidate the experiences of learners with disabilities participating in the Samar Division's ALS. Interview transcripts were meticulously transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. This began with thorough data immersion to achieve familiarity, followed by open coding to identify significant data segments pertinent to the research questions. Subsequent stages involved clustering codes into overarching themes that encapsulated recurrent patterns regarding learners' challenges and the support mechanisms within the ALS context. Themes were iteratively reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure conceptual clarity and analytic depth. The final phase involved synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative enriched by participant quotations and supported by extant literature. Grounded in narrative inquiry principles and guided by Mucio's (2021) restorying framework, the analysis prioritized learners' voices to illuminate how individualized transition strategies facilitate their academic and social inclusion. This methodological approach generated nuanced insights intended to inform educators and policymakers seeking to enhance support systems for learners with disabilities.

FINDINGS

The data collection process was meticulously organized, with interviews ranging from 18 to 38 minutes in duration. All sessions were audio-recorded following informed consent procedures, transcribed verbatim, and carefully verified to ensure faithful representation of the participants' narratives. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, prioritizing both accessibility and confidentiality. To enrich the depth of understanding, data triangulation was employed by integrating arts-based methodologies, including visual art creations and narrative reflections. This multifaceted approach provided a more comprehensive portrayal of the lived experiences of learners with disabilities enrolled in the Samar Division's Alternative Learning System (ALS).

Through qualitative thematic analysis of interview transcripts, participant-generated documents, and arts-based data, several salient themes emerged. These included personal challenges encountered by learners, the coping mechanisms they employed, and the critical support systems surrounding them. Open and focused coding processes revealed the participants' remarkable resilience in the face of stigma and discrimination. The findings further illuminated the indispensable support provided by family members, educators, and the broader community throughout their educational journeys. Additionally, the results underscored a pressing need for enhanced teacher training and improved access to educational resources within the ALS framework. Participants also expressed strong aspirations for pursuing higher education and engaging in advocacy efforts.

The demographic profile of participants ranged in age from 24 to 46 years and encompassed a variety of disabilities, such as visual impairment, cerebral palsy, and limb discrepancy. Their diverse backgrounds included current ALS students, employed professionals, and community workers, representing a wide spectrum of socioeconomic circumstances. This heterogeneity enriched the contextual depth of their narratives, highlighting both individual challenges and collective sources of strength.

In sum, the study offers nuanced insights into the educational experiences of learners with disabilities participating in the ALS. It advocates for the adoption of inclusive educational practices that acknowledge and address their distinct needs. The findings provide valuable guidance for policymakers and educators aiming to improve accessibility, cultivate supportive learning environments, and empower learners to achieve both academic success and personal development.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the lived experiences of learners with disabilities participating in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) within the Samar Division, illuminating both the obstacles they encounter and their notable resilience. Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach, the research identifies significant challenges including inadequate physical accessibility, a shortage of specialized training for educators, the absence of customized learning materials, and occurrences of bullying and social prejudice. Despite these difficulties, participants demonstrated considerable motivation, personal development, and aspirations toward continuing education and active community engagement. These findings underscore the crucial role of ALS in delivering adaptable and supportive educational environments. The results highlight the necessity of enhancing professional development programs for teachers, instituting comprehensive anti-bullying policies, and promoting cooperative involvement among stakeholders to foster genuinely inclusive educational settings. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of centering learners' personal experiences and social-emotional competencies in the formulation of inclusive education policies. By recounting their journeys of perseverance and self-advocacy, participants advocate for the integration of assistive technologies and peer support systems as essential components for educational success. While acknowledging the study's limitations concerning sample size and methodological scope, the research offers valuable contributions toward improving the educational experiences of learners with disabilities and advancing inclusive practices within the ALS framework.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of learners with disabilities participating in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) within the Samar Division, uncovering a nuanced balance of advantages and challenges. Utilizing a narrative inquiry methodology, the research illuminated the ways in which ALS contributes to the development of self-confidence, social inclusion, and personal growth among its learners. However, despite these beneficial outcomes, persistent challenges remain, including insufficient teacher preparation, scarce educational resources, incidents of bullying, and barriers to accessibility, all of which impede the educational advancement of these individuals.

The results highlight the essential contribution of nurturing relationships, tailored instructional approaches, and adaptive learning techniques in mitigating these challenges. The participants' stories emphasize the significance of resilience and self-advocacy, offering important perspectives to guide the formulation of inclusive education policies. This study calls for immediate reforms within ALS, prioritizing enhanced professional development for educators, better allocation of resources, the integration of inclusive teaching materials, and robust anti-bullying initiatives. Addressing these critical areas is imperative for ALS to effectively realize its goal of delivering equitable and empowering educational experiences for learners with disabilities.

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