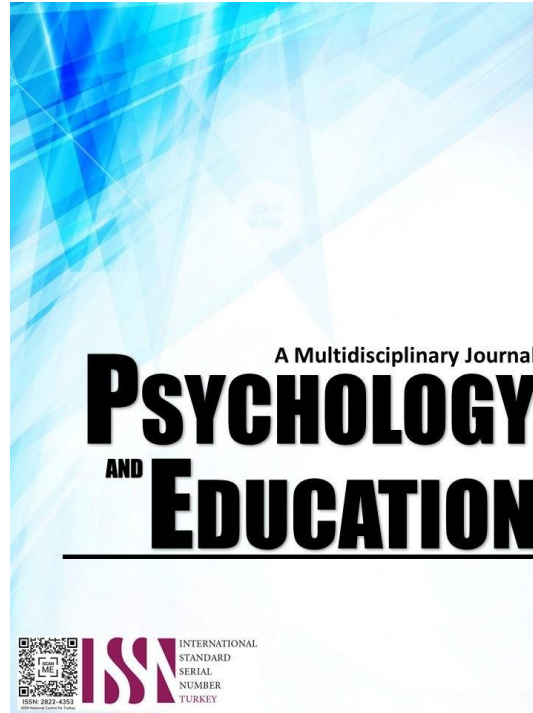


# LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SYSTEM (ALS) LEARNERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION



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# Lived Experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Learners: A Phenomenological Exploration

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences and motivations of students enrolled in Dalipuga National High School's Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Iligan City. A purposive sample of ALS students from the specified locality participated in the study, which was carried out throughout the 2024–2025 school year. To identify significant patterns and viewpoints, the study employed a qualitative-descriptive research approach and conducted a thematic analysis of learner narratives. According to the findings, students joined ALS to continue their education after a break, pursue professional objectives, and overcome systemic obstacles, including peer pressure and poverty. Despite highlighting a discrepancy between learned skills and labor market demands, many respondents indicated their desire for vocational jobs and work abroad. The inaccessibility of financing for business and the absence of official job placement assistance were two other major obstacles that learners had to overcome. Despite these obstacles, respondents showed strong resilience, viewing education as a stepping stone to socio-economic mobility. Most respondents came from low-income households, further emphasizing ALS as a critical pathway for marginalized youth to re-engage with education and aspire for better opportunities. An action plan was developed to enhance the employability, entrepreneurial readiness, and educational retention of ALS learners by implementing targeted vocational training, flexible learning strategies, industry partnerships, and systematic support mechanisms.

**Keywords:** *Alternative Learning System (ALS), out-of-school youth, vocational training, socio-economic mobility, marginalized learners*

## Introduction

The urgent need to rectify the gaps and shortcomings in the Philippine basic education system—which had previously fallen short of international standards in terms of curriculum content, length of schooling, and student readiness—led to compliance with Republic Act No. 10533. To ensure that Filipino students possess the values, knowledge, and skills necessary for lifelong learning and meaningful engagement in society, the government enacted the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, acknowledging these challenges.

The Department of Education (DepEd) releases the enclosed Guidelines on the Implementation of Enhanced Alternative Learning System (ALS) 2.0 on the 2019 ALS K to 12 Curriculum under DepEd Order No. 013, series of 2019. This is in accordance with the mandate of Republic Act No. 10533, also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, and the administration's 10-point agenda. Because of misunderstandings about their educational background and talents, students in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) frequently experience severe discrimination in society. Many view ALS learners as dropouts or individuals who failed in the traditional school system, perpetuating a stigma that undermines their efforts to pursue education through alternative means.

This bias manifested in limited opportunities for employment, social exclusion, and being labeled as less capable than their peers in conventional schools. Additionally, ALS learners encountered prejudiced attitudes from some educators, employers, and community members, which further discouraged them from achieving their goals. These challenges underscore the need for increased awareness and acceptance of the ALS program as a legitimate and valuable educational pathway.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) was a government initiative in the Philippines that provided education to individuals who could not access or complete formal schooling. Established under the Department of Education (DepEd), ALS offered a flexible, modular approach, enabling learners to study at their own pace while accommodating various personal circumstances, such as work commitments or geographical limitations. It primarily served out-of-school youth, adults, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and those in marginalized sectors, ensuring that education was inclusive and accessible to all Filipinos.

To provide out-of-school youth and adults with flexible educational options, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) has implemented several programs under the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Key initiatives included the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program, which offered certifications commensurate with formal school levels to students who possessed basic literacy but had not completed formal elementary or secondary education, and the Basic Literacy Program (BLP), which sought to eradicate illiteracy by teaching reading, writing, and numeracy skills.

Informal Education (InfEd), which promoted lifelong learning through skill development, entrepreneurship, and self-improvement, was another component of ALS. To support these programs, DepEd implemented projects such as the Balik Paaralan Out-of-School Youth Program (BPOSA), the eSkwela/e-Learning Program, and the Mobile Teacher Program, which increased access to education and adapted it to the various needs of learners across the country.

Community Learning Centers (CLCs), mobile teachers, and distance learning modalities formed the backbone of ALS, making it adaptable to the varied needs of learners. The program also emphasized life skills, values formation, and preparation for employment

or further education. Successful completers received certification equivalent to formal elementary or secondary schooling, which empowered them to pursue higher education, vocational training, or other opportunities.

Recent initiatives have focused on enhancing digital literacy and providing post-program support, including career guidance and partnerships with local industries to facilitate employment opportunities. The ALS program continued to evolve to address the diverse needs of Filipino learners and to ensure that education remained a tool for empowerment and socio-economic mobility.

The objective of the study was to qualitatively determine the reasons why the learners had decided to join the ALS program, as well as their insights into their experiences. The study was conducted during the 3rd and 4th grading periods of the 2024–2025 school year. The researcher attended the training of trainers on content and delivery as part of the institution's milestone requirement for the USAID Opportunity 2.0 Training and Development Grant, aiming to provide evidence-based recommendations through observation, interviews, and discussions with learners.

## Research Objectives

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System learners during the 3rd and 4th quarters of School Year 2024–2025. Specifically, this sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identify the lived experiences of ALS learners.
2. Determine the challenges encountered by ALS learners.
3. Explore the personal philosophies of ALS learners and gather insights from stakeholders on the assistance provided to support their development.
4. Formulate an action plan based on the findings of the study.

## Methodology

### Research Design

The study applied the phenomenology research method. The researcher employed the triangulation method, which involved observation, interviews, and focus group discussions. The primary goal of the approach was to develop a comprehensive description of the phenomenon's nature (Creswell, 2018). The data gathered were read, reread, and selected for phrases and themes, which were then grouped to form clusters of meaning. Through this process, the researcher aimed to identify the lived experiences, challenges encountered, and their philosophies in life, as well as to develop an action plan based on the study's findings. Through this process, the researcher aimed to uncover the universal meaning of the event, situation, or experience, leading to a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

### Participants

The participants were the Alternative Learning System learners in a public ALS center in Northern Mindanao. In selecting the participants, they were chosen through purposive sampling, in which the researcher selected those aged 18 years old and above, unemployed, willing to participate in the interview, and enrolled in the School Year 2024–2025. A total of seven learners participated in the interview, selected through purposive sampling as part of the study's qualitative research design. For the focus group discussion, the researcher also invited ALS teachers, barangay officials, and a Youth Development Coordinator.

### Procedure

The data gathering of this study followed the activities outlined in this selection. The first activity was to obtain official permission to conduct the study. After the approval of the Schools Division Superintendent, the researcher began meeting with participants who must be 18 years old and above, unemployed, enrolled in this school year, and willing to participate in and be interviewed. The ALS teacher endorsed the participants in a public ALS center in Northern Mindanao who met the criteria for being chosen as my respondents.

The researcher convened the official participants and provided an introduction outlining the study's goal. The researcher explained the goal before presenting the completed questionnaire and going over each item in detail. Before being questioned, the participants were given enough time and opportunity to ask questions. The researcher conducted interviews with the participants. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was scheduled on the last working day, which covered all the participants' responses following the transcription of the data to validate the participants' answers. Also, a separate FGD by barangay officials and the youth development coordinator was conducted. This focus group discussion, intended for these personalities, would help substantiate different points of view about ALS learners' experiences.

It was specifically used to analyze unstructured text, audio, video, and image data from surveys, focus groups, interviews, social media, and journal articles, among other sources. Through the use of qualitative coding, the researcher was also aided in organizing and analyzing text, audio, video, and image data. High agreement indicated a robust analysis, and the legitimacy of the coding process was ensured by establishing inter-coder reliability through separate coding by a few specialists. To learn more about the process of forming a mathematical identity, the coded data was examined. To record contextual information, observations, and thoughts, thorough field notes were taken both during and after interviews throughout the research process. When analyzing the data, these annotations provide

important context.

In conclusion, the methodological framework, interviews, transcription and analysis software, and adopted questionnaires all worked together to strengthen the validity and reliability of the study construction.

### Data Analysis

Taylor and Francis (2019) acknowledged Braun and Clark's (2017) framework for theme analysis, which was used in this study. Finding patterns or themes to analyze the data between two levels—the semantic and latent themes—is known as thematic analysis. A six-phase structure was used in this investigation.

The researcher read and reread the transcript to attempt to better connect themselves with the data corpus throughout the first phase of the framework. The second stage involved creating the first codes, which were used to arrange the data in a meaningful and logical manner. After data collection, the researcher's independent transcription and the audio-recorded interviews were converted into text using the transcription software NVIVO, MAXQDA, and POPAI to reach the same stage. To ensure accuracy and clarity, the transcribed data was carefully reviewed and edited, and a focus group discussion was set up to confirm the participants' answers.

Data had to be divided into manageable chunks in order to be coded. A sentence-by-sentence unit of analysis was used in the third phase, which involved theme searching. This required looking for patterns that revealed something significant or interesting about the sentence's data. The fourth stage of thematic data analysis involved reviewing the themes and developing preliminary themes based on the findings of the previous phase. The final step in refining the data analysis process was Phase Five, which involved developing and labeling themes. The reporting of the study's results was the final stage.

### Ethical Considerations

Before any data collection took place, informed consent was obtained from the participants and their guardians. The consent form outlined the voluntary nature of participation, providing assurance that participants could withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Students and parents were informed that their participation was not mandatory and that there would be no penalties for non-participation. Those who chose to participate could also withdraw at any time without explanation. It was clearly communicated that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their standing in school or their relationship with teachers or peers.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis, results, and discussions of the data gathered by the researcher.

### *The Lived Experiences of ALS Learners*

Table 1. *Reasons of ALS Learners in joining this Program*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-Themes/Key Points</i>
Educational Continuation and Completion	Resuming Interrupted Education Aspiration for Higher Education
Career and Employment Goals	Achieving Specific Vocational Aspirations Broad Employment Readiness
Overcoming Adversity and Structural Barriers	Addressing Socio-economic Hardships Counteracting Peer Influence or Past Mistakes

The formulated themes and sub-themes revealed that learners' motivations for joining the ALS program were deeply rooted in addressing past educational disruptions, pursuing socio-economic mobility, and navigating systemic barriers.

The decision to enroll in the ALS program emerged as a strategic response to intersecting educational and socio-economic challenges, reflecting learners' determination to reclaim agency over disrupted trajectories. Central to this motivation was the pursuit of educational continuation, where respondents framed ALS as a critical pathway to complete foundational schooling interrupted by familial, financial, or health-related adversities.

For instance, P1 explicitly tied enrollment to the need to "continue working toward my goal and finish Senior High" after caregiving responsibilities had forced her to abandon formal education. At the same time, P7 emphasized joining ALS to rectify incomplete elementary schooling due to familial instability, stating, "I was unable to complete elementary due to hardship."

These responses highlighted ALS's role as a second-chance mechanism for marginalized learners, enabling them to restore educational dignity and progress toward advanced opportunities. P5 further reinforced this theme, noting enrollment was driven by the desire to "continue studies because I only reached grade 9," illustrating how learners perceived ALS as a bridge to overcome truncated academic journeys.

Enrollment was deeply intertwined with career-oriented aspirations, underscoring the program's role in bridging education to economic mobility. Respondents like P2, who linked ALS completion to vocational goals —such as "graduate and achieve my dream job of

becoming a chef" —and P6, who emphasized enrollment as preparation to "pursue college," revealed a deliberate alignment of education with specific livelihood pathways. Even learners with generalized aims, such as P3's pursuit of a diploma to "achieve my goal" (implicitly tied to employment), tied credential attainment to broader labor market access. These narratives aligned with P4's resolve to "make the most of each day" through education, reflecting a shared understanding of ALS as a credentialing gateway to counteract employer biases against undereducated applicants—a challenge explicitly cited by P5 and P6, who noted employers' preference for experienced candidates.

Underpinning these motivations was a resilience against structural inequities that initially derailed formal education. Learners' enrollment decisions often directly confronted systemic barriers, including poverty, familial instability, and peer influence. P2's discontinuation of schooling due to unaffordable eyeglasses, "we still don't have money to buy eyeglasses," and P7's experience of familial precarity "my father is an alcoholic and doesn't provide for my mother," exemplified how socio-economic precarity disrupted education. Similarly, P4 and P5 acknowledged peer influence as a catalyst for past absenteeism, with P4 stating he was "always absent because influenced by friends" before recommitting to ALS. By re-engaging with education, these learners demonstrated agency in dismantling systemic marginalization, repurposing ALS as both a shield against exclusion and a vehicle for socio-economic advancement. P1's aspiration to "pursue what I want to take in college" and P6's goal to work abroad as a welder further reflected how education was leveraged to transcend localized barriers and redefine life trajectories.

The interplay of these themes confirmed ALS's role as a transformative space where personal agency intersected with systemic change. Learners' motivations—rooted in educational completion (P1, P5, P7), career advancement (P2, P4, P6), and resistance to structural inequities (P2, P4, P7)—revealed the program's capacity to address layered adversities. By reconciling past disruptions and acquiring credentials for economic participation, respondents positioned ALS as a lifeline for marginalized communities, validating its critical role in fostering inclusive development. These findings underscore the urgency of integrating ALS with vocational training and financial support, ensuring that its potential as a bridge to equitable opportunity is fully realized.

**Educational Continuation and Completion**

Many ALS learners viewed the program as a second chance to complete their education after facing interruptions due to familial, financial, or health-related challenges. For instance, a study by Osawa (2021) highlighted that ALS served as a viable alternative pathway for out-of-school youth and adults, providing opportunities to pursue further studies and employment despite previous educational disruptions.

**Career and Employment Goal**

ALS learners often aligned their educational pursuits with specific career goals, aiming to enhance their employability and socio-economic status. According to 2018 World Bank research, 60% of ALS enrollees who passed the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) exam went on to pursue higher education or vocational training, and those who did so had double the likelihood of securing full-time formal positions compared to those who did not.

**Overcoming Adversity and Structural Barriers**

Enrollment in ALS reflected learners' resilience in confronting systemic barriers such as poverty, familial instability, and peer influence. A study by Tomarong and Rañoa (2024) found that learners' reasons for enrolling in ALS were significantly correlated with factors influencing their discontinuation, indicating that addressing these barriers was crucial for program retention.

ALS played a transformative role in the lives of learners, enabling them to overcome educational and socio-economic challenges. Javillonar and Elma (2022) found that ALS completers reported positive effects on their lives, including improved educational attainment and employment prospects, underscoring the program's impact on personal and professional development.

The existing literature supported the understanding that ALS served as a critical intervention for marginalized learners, providing opportunities to overcome educational disruptions, achieve career goals, and navigate systemic barriers. These findings emphasized the need for continued support and integration of ALS with vocational training and financial assistance to maximize its potential as a bridge to equitable opportunities.

**The Challenges encountered by ALS Learners**

Table 2. Challenges Encountered of ALS Learners	
Themes	Sub-Themes/Key Points
Aspirational Skill Acquisition	Vocational Skill Development General Job Readiness
Systematic Barriers to Employment	Labor Market Biases Skills-Job Mismatch
Entrepreneurship Challenges	Capital Inaccessibility Spatial and Logistical Constraints
Reliance on informal Networks	Community-Based Innovation Familial and Community Ties



Structural Marginalization	Fragmented Job Discovery Mechanisms
	Credential Recognition Gaps
	Cyclical Poverty
Recommendations for Systemic Intervention	Curriculum – Industry Alignment
	Financial and Institutional Support
	Employer Partnership

The findings from the analysis of ALS learners revealed a landscape marked by ambition, systemic inequities, and resilience, shaped by the interplay of individual aspirations and structural barriers. Learners' narratives underscored a strong drive to acquire vocational skills, with P2 explicitly prioritizing "skills for a restaurant" and P3 focusing on "cooking food," reflecting targeted efforts to align training with specific industries.

Similarly, P5 and P6 emphasized scaffolding, while P1 and P7 adopted a broader approach, seeking "anything, as long as I can get a job" or aiming to "learn anything" to enhance employability. These responses highlighted a pragmatic understanding of skills as critical currency in the labor market, yet systemic barriers undercut this readiness. P1 and P2 identified a persistent mismatch between acquired competencies and employer demands, with P1 noting "skills didn't match job requirements" and P2 lamenting that "skills [were] insufficient despite diploma." Employer biases compounded this disconnect, as P3 reported employers remained "unimpressed, even with a diploma," and P6 observed a preference for "experienced applicants over recent graduates." Such barriers exposed a paradox: while learners proactively built skills, labor market skepticism toward ALS credentials stifled their progress, suggesting curricula required closer alignment with industry needs to bridge credibility gaps.

Entrepreneurial aspirations further highlighted systemic challenges, particularly the near-universal hurdle of capital inaccessibility, which was cited by P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7 as a barrier to starting businesses. P2 and P3 also emphasized spatial constraints, with P2 stating there was "no place to put up business" and P3 echoing "no place to set up." Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated resourcefulness through community-based innovation, as exemplified by P1's repurposing of coconut husks into decorative ropes, and reliance on familial networks (P2: "family business influences"; P3, P6: opportunities discovered "through family"). However, these informal strategies were insufficient to overcome structural poverty cycles, as P7 pragmatically acknowledged, framing entrepreneurship as a gradual process where "everything started small."

The reliance on informal networks extended to job discovery, with learners relying on fragmented channels such as social media (P1, P6), ALS instructors (P5), or neighbors (P7). While these mechanisms reflected adaptability, they also underscored marginalized access to formal employment systems, perpetuating inequities. This marginalization was deepened by employer distrust in ALS credentials, as P5 noted employers remained "unconvinced of capabilities" even after diploma completion, reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

The data positioned ALS learners as ambitious actors navigating structural marginalization. They were not hindered by a lack of initiative but by systemic gaps in credential recognition, financial support, and institutional access. To address these barriers, the findings advocated for integrated interventions: strengthening vocational training to meet industry demands (e.g., tailoring curricula to culinary or construction sectors), embedding financial literacy and startup support into ALS programs, and fostering employer partnerships to validate diplomas.

For instance, aligning scaffolding training (P5, P6) with certification programs could have enhanced employability, while microloan initiatives could have addressed P4 and P6's cited challenge of "no capital." By bridging these gaps, ALS could have transformed from a remedial education model into a catalyst for equitable opportunity, empowering learners to convert aspirations—whether as chefs, entrepreneurs, or skilled laborers—into sustainable livelihoods. The learners' resilience, evident in their resourcefulness and determination, underscored the urgency of systemic reforms to ensure their skills and ambitions were met with commensurate opportunities.

### ***Aspirational Skill Acquisition***

ALS learners expressed strong vocational ambitions, often targeting specific industries, such as the culinary arts and construction. For instance, learners prioritized "skills for a restaurant" or "cooking food," reflecting a practical orientation toward employment. However, these aspirations were frequently undermined by a mismatch between the skills acquired and the labor market requirements. According to DepEd's ALS program overview, many learners experienced a gap between vocational training and actual employer demands, particularly as ALS often lacked direct alignment with evolving industry standards (Department of Education, 2023). This concern echoed national trends where 65% of TVET graduates reported training-job mismatches (Senate of the Philippines, 2023), highlighting the urgency of revising ALS curricula to match real-world labor needs.

### ***Systemic Barriers to Employment***

Despite reforms, ALS learners remained structurally marginalized. Financial exclusion, stigma, inadequate facilities, and employer bias compounded to restrict livelihood opportunities. A 2024 study by Dacalos and Las Marias found that ALS learners faced compounded disadvantages due to both socio-economic background and institutional neglect. It often resulted in unstable or low-paying employment. Even with skill acquisition, learners often described a "cycle of poverty" that education alone could not break without systemic intervention (Dacalos & Las Marias, 2024).

Entrepreneurship Challenges

A majority of ALS learners cited entrepreneurship as a viable path; yet, nearly all struggled with inaccessibility to capital and spatial limitations. Learners frequently mentioned "no capital" and "no place to set up," echoing findings from UNESCO (2023), which emphasized that financial exclusion was a consistent barrier for marginalized learners in developing microenterprises. While learners demonstrated innovation—such as repurposing coconut husks—structural constraints, including a lack of startup funding, poor infrastructure, and limited formal guidance, persisted. The ALS Life Skills and Financial Literacy initiative addressed this by embedding entrepreneurship modules into community-based learning, thereby helping to bridge knowledge gaps (UNESCO, 2023).

Reliance on Informal Networks and Structural Marginalization

Due to marginal access to formal employment pathways, learners often depended on social media, neighbors, or family for job leads. This reliance reflected both resourcefulness and systemic exclusion from institutional job placement services. According to Opportunity 2.0's ALS employability study (2024), informal mechanisms dominated due to the lack of structured job placement assistance in ALS. Furthermore, learners reported that employers often dismissed ALS diplomas, revealing a widespread skepticism about the program's credibility (Opportunity International, 2024). This aligned with global trends in which alternative credentials lacked labor market traction, undermining efforts to upskill disadvantaged youth (Mendoza & Yap, 2024).

Recommendation for Systemic Intervention

Integrated training that combined technical and soft skills was critical to learner success. Programs like USAID's WBL-BYOB (Work-Based Learning—Be Your Own Boss) have proven effective in preparing ALS learners for both employment and entrepreneurship. The program enhanced learners' skills in communication, teamwork, and business planning, significantly improving their job-readiness and startup confidence (USAID Opportunity 2.0, 2023). These integrated models showed promise in transforming ALS from a remedial alternative into a comprehensive readiness program.

ALS has increasingly embedded 21st-century competencies—such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and adaptability—into its modules. These competencies were vital for learners navigating a digital and rapidly shifting job landscape. DepEd (2022) emphasized that ALS programs were then expected to promote these core skills as part of holistic education strategies. However, implementation varied significantly across regions due to disparities in teacher training and resource access (Javier et al., 2023), suggesting the need for stronger support systems.

A lack of ambition or effort did not hinder ALS learners. Instead, they navigated an education system shaped by structural barriers, market disconnects and limited institutional validation. To transform ALS into a catalyst for equity, reforms had to prioritize employer engagement, integrate life and technical skills, provide startup support, and enhance the legitimacy of credentials.

Learners' Personal Philosophies in Life and Insights from Stakeholders on the assistance provided to support their development

Table 3. Experiences in ALS	
Themes	Sub-Themes/Key Points
Challenges Leading to Discontinuation	Lack of Commitment Mismatched Priorities Personal Circumstances
Aspirations Driven by Economic Mobility	Employment Abroad Entrepreneurship Vocational Goals
Education as a Stepping Stone	ALS as a Pathway to Employment ALS Enabling Entrepreneurial Dreams

Challenges Leading to Discontinuation

Learners highlighted key barriers to ALS program retention, directly referencing their peers' experiences. P1 and P3 emphasized a lack of commitment, with P1 stating that some learners "lacked sincerity in pursuing their education," while P3 attributed discontinuation to learners being "not genuinely committed." These responses suggested that intrinsic motivation was a critical factor, as learners who perceived education as non-essential were more likely to disengage.

Practical challenges, such as competing priorities between work and education, were underscored by P2 and P5. P2 noted that absent learners "showed no urgency in continuing their studies," and P5 explained, "They focused more on sidelines to earn money," reflecting how socio-economic pressures often overridden educational goals. This aligned with the reality that many ALS learners were adults balancing survival needs with schooling. P4 introduced the role of personal circumstances, citing "personal reasons" for discontinuation. While vague, this response hinted at unspoken barriers (e.g., familial duties, health issues) that programs may have needed to address through tailored support.

ALS learners often faced significant barriers that led to program discontinuation. Intrinsic motivation played a crucial role; learners like P1 and P3 highlighted a lack of commitment among peers. This finding aligns with those from the Department of Education (2022),

which noted that learners with low intrinsic motivation were more likely to disengage from ALS programs.

Practical challenges, particularly the need to balance work and education, were emphasized by P2 and P5. P2 observed that some learners "showed no urgency in continuing their studies," while P5 noted that others "focused more on sidelines to earn money." These observations were supported by UNESCO (2023), which reported that economic pressures often forced learners to prioritize income-generating activities over education.

Personal circumstances, such as familial duties and health issues, also contributed to discontinuation. P4 mentioned "personal reasons" for dropping out, reflecting the findings of Javier et al. (2023), who identified personal and family-related challenges as significant factors affecting ALS learner retention.

### ***Aspirations Driven by Economic Mobility***

Learners' aspirations were overwhelmingly tied to economic advancement. P1, P4, and P6 prioritized overseas employment, with goals like becoming a "caregiver abroad" (P1), a "driver for large trucks abroad" (P4), or a "welder abroad" (P6). These responses reflected the Philippine context, where limited local opportunities drove aspirations for higher-paying jobs overseas, often requiring ALS certification as a baseline credential.

Entrepreneurial goals were also prominent. P3 aimed to "have her own business, such as a sari-sari store," while P7 sought to be the "boss of his own small business," emphasizing self-reliance. P2 combined both themes, aspiring to work as a chef abroad before opening a restaurant locally. These goals highlighted how learners viewed ALS as a foundation for financial independence, whether through skill-based careers or entrepreneurship. Vocational aspirations, such as P5's goal to drive "heavy equipment" or P6's welding ambition, further underscored the demand for practical, income-generating skills.

Many ALS learners viewed education as a pathway to economic advancement. Learners like P1, P4, and P6 expressed aspirations for overseas employment, aiming to become a "caregiver abroad," a "driver for large trucks abroad," and a "welder abroad," respectively. This trend was consistent with the Philippine Statistics Authority's (2023) report, which stated that a significant number of Filipinos sought overseas employment for better economic opportunities.

Entrepreneurial goals were also prominent among learners. P3 aimed to "have her own business, such as a sari-sari store," while P7 aspired to be the "boss of his own small business." These ambitions reflected findings from the Department of Education (2023), which highlighted the importance of integrating entrepreneurship education into ALS programs to support learners' economic aspirations.

### ***Education as a Stepping Stone***

Learners framed ALS completion as a pragmatic step toward larger goals. P6 stressed the importance of continuing studies, stating, "It was very important to keep believing in that," recognizing that education validated their employability. P1 and P4 tied their overseas aspirations to ALS certification, reflecting an understanding that formal credentials were non-negotiable in global job markets. For entrepreneurial learners like P3 and P7, ALS was seen as an enabling platform for business ventures. P3 explicitly linked finishing Senior High via ALS to starting a sari-sari store, while P7 viewed education as foundational for his entrepreneurial philosophy: "Everything started small." These responses positioned ALS not just as an academic program but as a tool for legitimizing skills and aspirations.

The retention challenges faced by ALS learners were highlighted by their responses, which revealed that discontinuation often stemmed from competing priorities between work and education, as well as weak intrinsic motivation. Learners, such as P1, P2, P3, and P5, emphasized how financial pressures and a lack of urgency or commitment led peers to prioritize immediate income over long-term educational goals. This tension was further underscored by the economic pragmatism driving their aspirations, where overseas employment (P1, P4, P6) and entrepreneurship (P3, P7) dominated their goals. These ambitions reflected a focus on securing immediate financial uplift, even if it risked disrupting their engagement with education.

ALS completion was often viewed by learners to achieve broader goals. P6 emphasized the importance of continuing studies, stating, "It was very important to keep believing in that," recognizing education as a validation of employability. This perspective aligns with the Department of Education's (2022) emphasis on the role of ALS in providing learners with the credentials necessary for employment and further education.

For entrepreneurial learners like P3 and P7, ALS provided a foundation for their business ventures. P3 linked finishing Senior High via ALS to starting a sari-sari store, while P7 viewed education as foundational for his entrepreneurial philosophy: "Everything started small." These views were supported by UNESCO (2023), which advocated for the inclusion of life skills and entrepreneurship training in ALS curricula to prepare learners for self-employment better.

For many learners, ALS completion was viewed primarily as a credentialing tool—a means to validate skills for employment or entrepreneurship rather than an intrinsic educational goal. This pragmatic perspective was evident in the responses of P1, P4, and P6, who tied their aspirations to overseas jobs that required certification, and in the responses of P3 and P7, who linked education to entrepreneurial credibility. To address these dynamics, ALS programs could have enhanced retention by integrating flexible scheduling to accommodate work conflicts and embedding livelihood skills training (e.g., caregiving, welding) that aligns with learners' economic



aspirations. Additionally, mentorship programs could have strengthened commitment by explicitly connecting educational milestones to tangible outcomes, as exemplified by P6's emphasis on the importance of "believing" in the process.

By centering learners' voices—such as P5's focus on earning and P7's vision of starting small—the ALS program could have better bridged the gap between education and economic mobility. This approach ensured that the program not only addressed immediate livelihood needs but also nurtured long-term goals, creating a pathway where education and economic advancement coexisted synergistically.

### *Insights from Stakeholders on the Assistance Provided to ALS Development*

The challenges faced by ALS learners, including intrinsic motivation, economic pressures, and personal circumstances, significantly impacted program retention. However, learners' aspirations for economic mobility, whether through overseas employment or entrepreneurship, highlighted the importance of aligning ALS programs with their goals. By integrating flexible scheduling, livelihood-skills training, and mentorship programs, ALS could have better supported learners in achieving their aspirations, ensuring that education and economic advancement coexisted synergistically.

By supporting efforts to increase the capacity of ALS teachers, enhancing educational resources, and assisting in the upgrade of Community Learning Centers, our organization can help empower students in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). In addition to offering career coaching, job-matching services, and avenues to more education or employment, our goal is to incorporate life skills, work preparedness, and technical-vocational training into ALS programs. To support ALS students and out-of-school adolescents, we also aim to enlist the help of local government and corporate sector partners to invest in youth development and promote the strengthening of monitoring systems and policies.

By establishing realistic assistance programs at the local level, the organization we represent, as a barangay councilor, can make a substantial contribution to the empowerment of ALS students. We can begin by locating and contacting the barangay's out-of-school youth and urging them to sign up for ALS through informational campaigns and house-to-house visits. To make Community Learning Centers (CLCs) more conducive to learning, we might set aside a portion of the barangay budget for their upkeep or improvement.

Additionally, we may adopt local resolutions that offer rewards to ALS students who complete their programs, such as food packs during sessions, school supplies, or assistance with transportation. Additionally, by collaborating with TESDA and nearby companies, we may offer short courses in welding, cooking, tailoring, or basic computer skills, bringing livelihood programs and skills training closer to the community. We can assist ALS graduates in finding employment by organizing job fairs or connecting them with local employers. Last but not least, we can collaborate closely with DepEd to monitor the development of ALS students and ensure that their requirements are taken into account in barangay development plans.



Figure 1. Word Cloud General Theme

The themes in the word cloud reflected the complex realities that shaped the ALS learners in Dalipuga National High School. Educational continuation and completion served as a foundation, providing learners with the qualifications needed to pursue career and employment goals. Despite this, they faced systematic barriers to employment, entrepreneurship challenges, and structural marginalization, which often required them to rely on informal networks for support. Aspirations driven by economic mobility and the desire for skill acquisition motivated learners to overcome adversity and complete their education. However, challenges such as poverty and personal responsibilities often led to discontinuation. Education was seen not just as a goal but as a stepping stone to better opportunities. These themes highlighted the need for systemic interventions and targeted support to ensure that ALS learners were equipped not only academically but also with the life skills needed to thrive in their personal and professional lives.

## Conclusions

Students who have had their formal education interrupted due to health, financial, or caregiving issues may greatly benefit from the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Beyond merely helping students recover academically, ALS gives them a renewed sense of dignity and purpose, enabling them to take back control of their lives. This role establishes ALS as a tool for personal growth in addition to serving as a bridge for education. Their participation in ALS demonstrates the learners' strong dedication to social mobility and self-improvement. Students show that ALS is a deliberate step toward creating better livelihoods by coordinating their educational path with career goals, whether those goals are employment, occupational skills, or additional education. To realize its full potential, this alignment must be strengthened with pertinent training and career opportunities.

ALS students still encounter major structural obstacles, including as financial exclusion, credential skepticism, and employment bias, despite their lofty goals. Their employability and entrepreneurial aspirations are hindered by these obstacles, which underscore the inadequacies in ALS's alignment with labor market demands. Improving ALS's efficacy and credibility requires addressing these problems through curriculum reform and closer industry collaborations. Although many students demonstrate resilience and inventiveness by utilizing informal networks or community connections, these tactics are often insufficient to overcome poverty or achieve long-term success. This loop can be broken with the use of integrated solutions such as improved job placement services, startup assistance, and financial literacy initiatives. To grow these projects and guarantee continuous implementation, institutional and governmental support is required. Ultimately, societal and socio-economic realities—rather than individual shortcomings—are the primary cause of the difficulties faced by ALS students. ALS can enhance retention and facilitate students' continued education and career advancement by implementing learner-centered policies, such as flexible class schedules, mentorship, and targeted skills training. By doing this, ALS is certain to operate as a true engine for fairness and sustainable development rather than merely as a band-aid solution.

Based on the results and conclusions, the following recommendations are presented. First, strengthen industry-relevant training and partnerships by incorporating vocational and technical training aligned with labor market demands into the modernized ALS curricula. Collaborating with businesses would enhance the legitimacy of ALS credentials and increase learners' employability, particularly in high-demand fields such as welding, construction, caregiving, and culinary arts, ensuring that students graduate with both employable skills and knowledge. Second, provide financial and logistical support to learners by integrating ALS with livelihood starter kits, transportation or meal allowances, and scholarship funds to help students overcome systemic obstacles such as poverty and precarious living situations. By reducing financial burdens that often force learners to prioritize income over education, these measures can lower dropout rates. Third, institutionalize flexible and learner-centered approaches by adopting mobile ALS sessions, flexible class scheduling, and modular learning, especially for working students, single parents, or those with caregiving responsibilities. Adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of adult learners can enhance retention and foster persistence despite personal challenges.

Fourth, embed entrepreneurship and financial literacy modules in the curriculum, recognizing that many ALS students aspire to run their own businesses. Practical training should cover small business startup and management, regulatory requirements, access to microfinance, and basic budgeting, bridging the gap between education and sustainable income generation. Finally, establish mentorship and career pathway programs by pairing ALS students with professionals, community leaders, or alumni, and providing services such as resume-building workshops, mock interviews, and job-matching support. Mentorship can boost self-motivation and clearly demonstrate how educational achievement can translate into tangible career success.

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