

Exploring The Lived Experience of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Junior High School Learners in Siargao Island: Implications for a Learner-Centered Intervention Program

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) junior high school students on Siargao Island, Philippines, while enrolled in the program, focusing on the challenges they encountered, their coping mechanisms, and their adaptability, which led to the proposed learner-centered intervention. This was done through a qualitative method, using a phenomenological research design, with twenty (20) ALS junior high school learners as primary participants, three (3) of their parents, and three (3) teachers as secondary participants. Data were gathered through in-person interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed nine (9) themes: experiencing education as a second chance for personal growth and empowerment, navigating barriers to education with resilience and determination, finding support, acceptance, and shared responsibility in the learning environment, structural barriers to educational access, multiple role management and time allocation constraints, challenges in self-directed learning and learner self-efficacy, adaptive learning and self-management strategies, social support systems in learning persistence, and motivation, resilience, and commitment to education. These indicate that the learners' lived experiences while enrolled in the program are characterized by challenges that require coping mechanisms and adaptability to overcome. The study proposed the Siargaanon ALS Learners' Support and Empowerment (SALS LSE) Program, which is derived from the findings and contains components, outcomes, strategies, implementation approach, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, responsible entity/stakeholders, and timeline and resources needed, which are designed to address structural, social, and cognitive barriers while targeting the strengthening of adaptive skills and learner resilience. The study concluded with recommendations for ALS policymakers and decision-makers to adapt the program during implementation.

Keywords: *Alternative Learning System, lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and adaptability, Siargao Island*

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been credited as the vital solution to economic and developmental progress, and it serves as a fundamental framework in shaping human superiority, social stability, and economic power (Patrinis, 2016, as cited by Aniasco, 2024). The World Bank Group stresses that education is the foundational infrastructure for good jobs and the surest way out of poverty. For individuals, education promotes employment, earnings, health, and poverty reduction. Globally, there is a 9% increase in hourly earnings for each additional year of

schooling. For societies, it drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion (2025).

In China and Malaysia, a panel study finds that government spending on education positively affects GDP per capita, with particularly strong effects from investment in secondary education (Wang & Zhang, 2024). In Singapore, the key task is not only to cope with economic challenges but also to foster greater social cohesion and social capital amid heightened social risks and uncertainties. Expanding educational opportunities, diversifying curricula, maintaining the quality and relevance of education, and critically matching these to the needs of the labor market make the school system a true source of upward mobility (Gopinathan, 2007, as cited in Wang, 2021).

As a result, economic growth, development, and poverty reduction depend on knowledge and skills rather than on the number of years people spend in a classroom. The role of education in fostering economic development has hence changed, in the sense that there is a shift toward a call to action for learning for all.

For these countries, the investment in education generated significant results that contributed to their economic success. To compare with the situation in the Philippines, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) reported that government investment in education and training remains low compared to developed peers, such as Singapore, thereby negatively impacting student learning outcomes and educational quality. The country must increase education spending to improve student learning achievements (2023).

A similar empirical study examined issues surrounding the implementation of inclusive education practices and identified barriers to effective inclusion, including limited teacher training for diverse learning needs, insufficient instructional support materials, and gaps in policy implementation at the school level. The study underscores the persistent difficulties in making classrooms truly accessible and equitable for learners with diverse abilities (Beltran et al., 2025).

These factors, identified as limiting the delivery of effective and inclusive instruction in the Philippine setting, are also observed in higher education and alternative modes of delivery. Based on the evidence presented, these are key factors in sustaining economic advancements, but are hampered by several factors, especially in the provincial areas in the Philippines; for this reason, the Alternative Learning System (ALS), which is a parallel learning system in the country that provides a practical option to the existing formal instruction, was started. When one does not have or cannot access formal education in schools, ALS is an alternative or substitute as it includes both the non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills.

The ALS program actively targets marginalized populations, including older adults, persons with disabilities, and learners from remote or socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, thereby addressing systemic inequities in access to education (DepEd, 2022; Quezon City Government, 2025). By integrating contextualized instruction and recognizing prior learning experiences, the program is designed to enable adult learners to engage meaningfully with the curriculum, facilitating pathways to higher education, vocational training, and improved employment opportunities.

This study examined gaps observed in the implementation of the ALS, i.e., their unique experiences with the challenges they encountered, coping mechanisms, and adaptability, among others, that they have to foster for a successful completion of the program. These identified gaps remain underexplored, especially in the rural areas where access remains a primary issue, and these multisectoral challenges persist.

Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as an avenue for individuals who are unable to attend formal schooling to complete their academic journey and participate in various industries. The age requirement for the Elementary level in the Philippines is 13 years old and

above, while for the Junior High School level, it is 16 years old and above. ALS is designed for out-of-school youth and adults who wish to complete their basic education and earn an accredited certificate equivalent to formal schooling. Adults enroll in the program to accomplish their schooling, but due to their advanced age, they may face prejudice and judgment from their peers, family, or children.

The ALS framework functions as a second-chance education program, providing learners with the opportunity to develop functional literacy, life skills, and employable competencies while preparing for the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) examination, which serves as a credential equivalent to the completion of formal basic education (World Bank, 2025).

ALS in the Philippines serves as a vital educational pathway for out-of-school youth and adults who cannot access formal schooling due to socioeconomic, geographic, and personal constraints. In geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas such as Siargao Island, ALS plays a crucial role in addressing educational inequities. However, despite its importance, ALS junior high school learners continue to face various challenges that may affect their participation, persistence, and learning outcomes.

While existing policies and programs aim to improve ALS implementation, there remains limited understanding of the lived experiences of junior high school learners with ALS, particularly in island communities. Most interventions are often designed using generalized assumptions rather than being grounded in the learners' own perspectives, needs, and contextual realities. The absence of learner-centered, context-specific data may result in intervention programs misaligned with learners lived conditions, motivations, and challenges.

In Siargao Island, ALS learners encounter unique circumstances such as geographic isolation, limited access to learning resources, transportation difficulties, economic responsibilities, and social perceptions toward non-formal education. These conditions shape their learning experiences in ways that are not yet sufficiently documented or explored through phenomenological inquiry. Without a deeper understanding of how ALS learners perceive, experience, and make meaning of their educational journey, the development of responsive and effective learner-centered intervention programs remains constrained.

To ensure global relevance and alignment, this study adopted three Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations. These are Goal 4: Quality Education since the study looked into important alternative aspects of learning that catered to underserved communities. Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth by targeting adult learners who seek alternative education to gain work skills and economic growth; and Goal 10 Reduced Inequalities by providing a framework that addresses gaps in the lived experiences of the learners to cater to their unique situations.

The adoption of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to align the study with global perspectives and practices to contribute to the continued delivery of quality education, especially through the Alternative Learning System, and to support learners in acquiring decent work to contribute to economic growth and reduced inequalities. This also addresses Chapter 2 of the Philippine Development Plans, Promote Human and Social Development (Subchapter 2.2: Improve Education and Lifelong Learning), while supporting the Pangasinan State University's Research Agenda on Teacher Education and Education Management, and Youth, Adults, and Indigenous People Empowerment.

The study is an important initiative in the generation of new knowledge based on the lived experiences of ALS learners on Siargao Island. This aims to contribute to the development of additional knowledge anchored in a feasible intervention framework to address the unique experiences learners encounter related to their demographic profile, lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and adaptability. These analyzed data inform interventions

relevant to the mandate and educational management of ALS in Siargao Island and other rural areas in the Philippines.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Alternative Learner System (ALS) junior high school learners in Siargao Island as a basis for designing a learner-centered intervention program.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of ALS Junior High School learners in Siargao Island?
2. What challenges do ALS learners encounter in pursuing their Junior High School education?
3. How do ALS learners cope with and adapt to these challenges in their educational journey?
4. Based on the findings of the study, what learner-centered intervention program may be proposed to address the identified needs and experiences of ALS junior high school learners?

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Junior High School learners in the Siargao Island Division, Surigao del Norte. It specifically looked into their lived experiences, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms and adaptability to inform the creation of a learner-centered intervention program. It is anchored in Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.

This study was limited to 20 junior high school learners across the 9 municipalities in the Division of Siargao, serving as the source of primary data through the extraction of their lived experiences via face-to-face interviews. The study focused on their lived experiences while participating in the program, and its duration is not limited to a particular school year but is based on the learners' experiences while officially enrolled in the program.

The study focuses solely on the learners' perspectives and does not extensively examine the viewpoints of ALS program implementers or policymakers. The proposed intervention program was conceptual and based solely on findings from primary and secondary participants within the scope of this research. Therefore, the results may not generalize to all ALS learners in the Philippines, but may provide insights relevant to similar island or geographically isolated contexts.

Review of Related Literature

The lived experiences of ALS learners show the reality of their daily encounters while enrolled in the program. The reviewed studies highlight that adult learners encounter several interconnected challenges that significantly impact their academic performance, participation, and overall learning engagement. These challenges vary across different contexts, but common barriers include limited time, responsibilities at home and work, financial constraints, and insufficient instructional support.

Mwaibingila et al. (2025) found that in Tanzania, language barriers and poor teaching and learning facilities significantly limited adult learners' understanding and academic success.

Similarly, Vaculíková et al. (2024) emphasized that adult learners' participation is influenced not only by personal circumstances but also by broader institutional and socio-economic conditions such as labor market structures and social policies. In Malaysia, Bok (2021) identified work commitments, family obligations, adaptation to academic life, and educational costs as major obstacles among adult learners in distance education.

In the Philippines, studies on ALS program implementation reveal that institutional and instructional factors significantly impact its effectiveness. Albert et al. (2024) highlighted that despite ALS's flexibility and its teachers' dedication, severe limitations in funding, facilities, instructional materials, and teacher-to-learner ratios continue to hinder the delivery of quality education. This concern was further emphasized by Balagtas et al. (2020), who found inconsistencies in governance, monitoring, and resource provision across learning centers, whereas Dizon and Torres (2021) stressed the importance of teacher competency and continuous professional development in ensuring responsive and learner-centered instruction, especially in addressing the diverse needs of ALS learners.

The studies further emphasize the crucial role of resilience, relationships, and stakeholder support in learner success. Abregoso and Dioso (2024) discovered that resilience and determination empower ALS learners to overcome personal and social challenges in pursuit of better opportunities. On a similar finding, Jimenez et al. (2026) portrayed ALS as a transformative and human-centered learning environment sustained by facilitators' commitment and learners' perseverance. The studies of Susbilla and Rollo (2025) and Ucab and Lozano (2023) also highlighted the positive impact of collaboration among teachers, families, communities, and stakeholders on learner motivation, persistence, and program completion. These studies demonstrate that the effectiveness of ALS relies on the combined influence of institutional support, quality instruction, learner resilience, and strong community engagement in fostering meaningful and sustainable learning outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored in Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, both of which emphasize learner-centered, experience-based, and self-directed learning aligned with the goals of this study.

The first theory is Adult Learning Theory as proposed by Malcolm Knowles, which asserts that adult and adolescent learners differ significantly from children in how they learn. Knowles identified key assumptions of adult learners: they are self-directed, bring a wealth of life experiences to the learning process, are ready to learn when they perceive relevance to their real-life roles, prefer problem-centered learning, and are primarily motivated by internal factors rather than external rewards (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015).

In the context of the Alternative Learning System, Junior High School learners, many of whom are working individuals, parents, out-of-school youth, etc., possess diverse life experiences that shape their learning needs and motivations. These learners often return to education with clear goals, such as securing a secondary education certification so they can further advance in senior high school, then college, or improving employment prospects where higher education is required.

The flexible structure of ALS allows learners to negotiate learning schedules, venues, and pacing, reflecting Knowles' assumption that learners thrive when they are given autonomy and control over their learning (Knowles, 1984). This theory emphasizes the importance of relevance and immediacy of application as the ALS curricula are designed to be contextualized and practical, enabling learners to connect lessons directly to daily life situations. This alignment supports learner engagement and persistence, particularly among learners who have previously

disengaged from formal education due to rigid structures and lack of relevance (Knowles et al., 2015).

The second theory is Experiential Learning Theory developed by David Kolb which explains learning as a cyclical process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. According to Kolb (1984), effective learning occurs through four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Learners may enter the cycle at any stage, but meaningful learning requires engagement in all four processes.

ALS learners are uniquely positioned within this framework, as their learning is deeply rooted in lived experiences, community interactions, and real-life challenges, considering that these are adult learners. They draw from work experiences, family responsibilities, and social encounters as concrete experiences that inform classroom discussions and learning activities. The lessons they receive through the program are paced according to their own schedules, which makes the experience more aligned with their experiences. Through guided interaction facilitated by ALS teachers, learners analyze these experiences and connect them to academic concepts, thereby enhancing understanding and retention (Kolb, 1984).

Active experimentation is evident when ALS learners apply newly acquired knowledge to real-world contexts, such as workplace problem-solving or decision-making in family and community settings. This experiential approach reinforces the relevance of learning and supports the development of practical life skills, which are central goals of the ALS program (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Collectively, Adult Learning Theory and Experiential Learning Theory provide a strong theoretical framework for understanding the unique lived experiences of Junior High School learners in ALS in Siargao Island. Knowles' theory explains why learners are motivated to re-engage with education when learning is self-directed and relevant, while Kolb's theory explains how learners construct knowledge through experience, reflection, and application, driven by their accumulated life experiences.

The integration of these theories highlights ALS as a learning environment where experience-driven, reflective, and self-directed learning processes influence learner engagement, consistency, and educational outcomes. These theories support the examination of learners' lived experiences in participating in the ALS program.

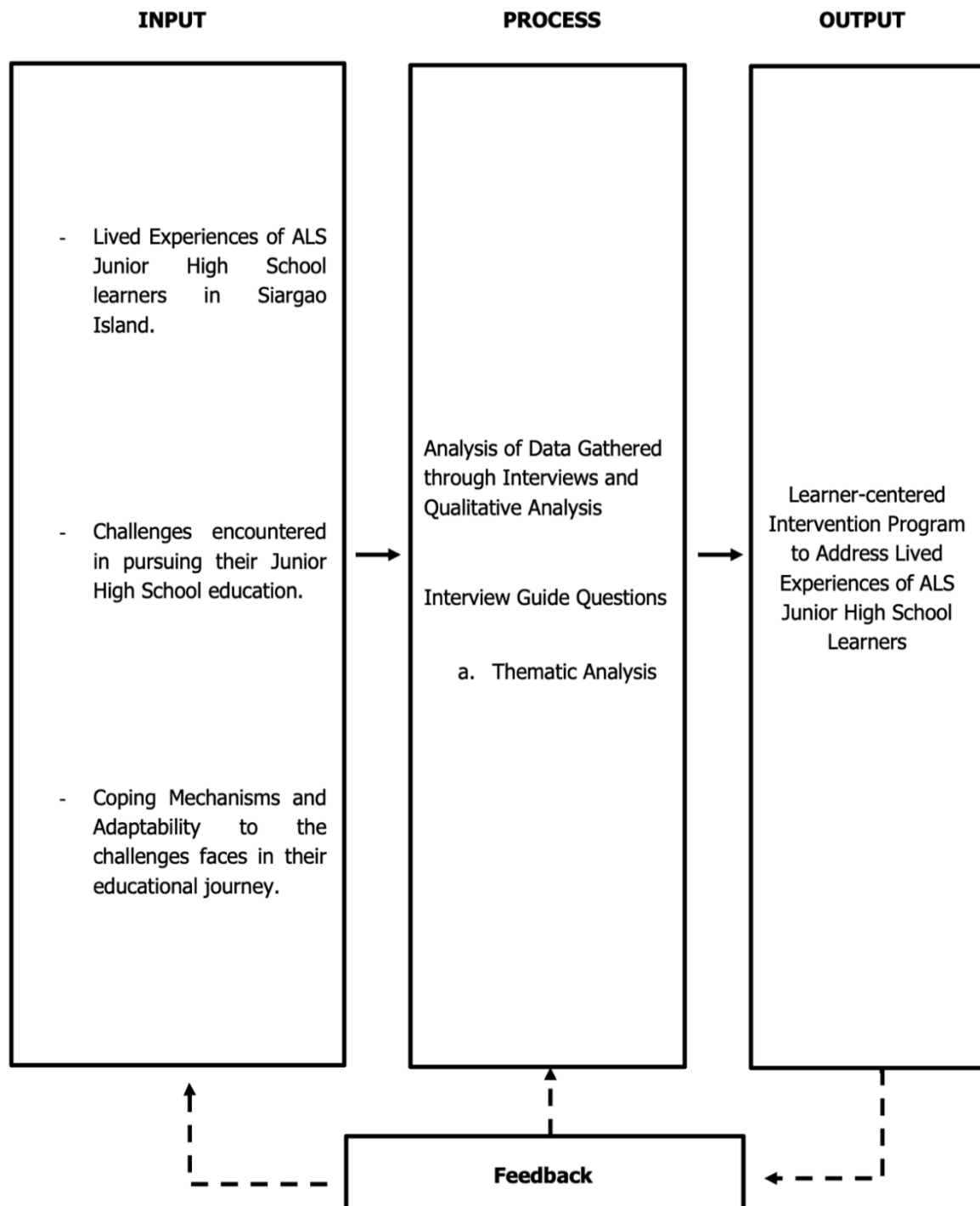
Conceptual Framework

This study examined the lived experiences of ALS Junior High School students on Siargao Island. It analyzed their lived experiences, challenges encountered while enrolled in the program, coping mechanisms employed, and adaptability, which led to the proposal of a learner-centered intervention program.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines is grounded in multiple legal bases. The 1987 Philippine Constitution recognizes and promotes non-formal and informal learning systems as part of the national education framework (Republic of the Philippines, 1987). This constitutional mandate is operationalized through the Governance of Basic Education Act (Republic Act No. 9155), which integrates ALS into the Department of Education's basic education mandate (Republic Act No. 9155). Most recently, Republic Act No. 11510 (the ALS Act) institutionalizes ALS as a free, flexible, and inclusive education program for out-of-school children in special cases and adults and provides the institutional support and resources necessary for its implementation (Republic Act No. 11510, 2020).

The variables identified in this study are the lived experiences, challenges faced during program enrollment, coping mechanisms used, and adaptability, which collectively contribute to the proposal of a learner-centered intervention program.

The data were gathered through interview sessions with the participants which included the collection of their demographic profile and lived experiences. These were then analyzed thematically which led to the common themes surrounding their experiences in participating in the ALS Junior High School program. Anchoring on these, a learner-centered interventional plan was proposed to address the experiences of the junior high school ALS learners.



METHODOLOGY

This chapter focused on the research design and methods used by the researcher to address the research questions. It outlined the research design, the participants of the study, locale and population of the study, the data gathering instrument and its validation, data gathering procedure, and the analysis of data.

Research Design

The study used a qualitative method, specifically phenomenology. Qualitative research delves into the rich textures of human experience and perspective, capturing contexts and nuances often lost in numerical translation. This study explored the depths of social phenomena within the lived experiences of the respondents, enabling connection with the subjective experiences by participating in the ALS in Siargao Island.

Research Steps

The qualitative data collection instruments used in this study were researcher-developed and designed specifically to address the research objectives and questions. The instrument was constructed based on the specific research questions and anchored on extensive review of relevant literature and studies to ensure alignment with the study's conceptual and theoretical framework.

To establish content validity and ensure accuracy, the instrument was submitted to a panel of evaluators with expertise in the subject area and in qualitative research methodology. The panel reviewed the instrument for clarity, relevance, coherence, and appropriateness of the questions in relation to the research problems. Their feedback and recommendations were incorporated to refine the instrument prior to data collection as well as the feedback from the adviser. This validation process ensured that the instrument was both methodologically sound and ethically appropriate for use in the study.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

The data collected focused on the phenomenon derived from the lived experiences of ALS junior high school learners on Siargao Island. The researcher sought the approval to conduct the study from the Division of Siargao office through the Schools Division Superintendent. After approval was granted, a formal letter requesting permission to conduct data collection was addressed to the principals or school heads of the identified schools. Then the letter to respondents was provided to them before the interview began.

A survey questionnaire was administered to the respondents via a face-to-face Key Informant Interview (KII). This was done individually and by the researcher himself to ensure the accuracy of the data gathered, which was recorded through audio. The duration of the data gathering lasted for three (3) weeks due to the distance of the location of the learners around the research locale.

Data Analysis Methods

The qualitative treatment of the data was a crucial part in the data analysis due to the nature of the data gathered. The survey questionnaire was qualitatively interpreted through

phenomenological analysis to identify a common phenomenon from the respondents' lived experiences.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical protocols by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and allowing participants to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, ethical issues encompassed the imperative to ensure the respectful portrayal of participants' views in the final analysis and reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of ALS Junior High School learners in Siargao Island?

In the first statement of the problem, the findings indicate that the participants lived experiences while enrolled in the ALS program in Siargao Island is they perceive education as a transformative opportunity for personal growth and empowerment, representing a second chance to advance their lives. They exhibit resilience and determination in overcoming various barriers to learning, demonstrating a proactive engagement with their educational journey. The learning environment emerges as a critical factor, providing support, acceptance, and a sense of shared responsibility, which collectively foster a community conducive to sustained learning and personal development.

Research Question 2: What challenges do ALS learners encounter in pursuing their Junior High School education?

In the second statement of the problem, the challenges that the learners faced reveal structural barriers that restrict access to education, such as institutional constraints and systemic issues. They also struggle with the demands of managing multiple roles and allocating limited time, which hinders their consistent engagement in learning. They encounter difficulties with self-directed learning, reflecting challenges in learner self-efficacy and confidence in independently navigating educational tasks. This highlights the intricate interplay of external and internal factors that shape adult learners' educational experiences.

Research Question 3: How do ALS learners cope with and adapt to these challenges in their educational journey?

In the third statement of the problem, the coping mechanisms and adaptability of the participants indicated that they employ adaptive learning and self-management strategies to navigate the demands of their educational pursuits, demonstrating agency in organizing and directing their learning. Social support systems, including peers, family, and educators, play a critical role in sustaining their persistence and engagement. The learners exhibit strong motivation, resilience, and commitment to education, which serve as driving forces that enable them to overcome obstacles and continue their personal and academic growth.

Research Question 4: Based on the findings of the study, what learner-centered intervention program may be proposed to address the identified needs and experiences of ALS junior high school learners?

Based on these findings and as a response to the fourth statement of the problem, the Siargaanon ALS Learners' Support and Empowerment (SALS LSE) Program is proposed. This learner-centered intervention program focuses on the lived experiences, challenges, coping

mechanisms and adaptability faced by ALS junior high school learners in Siargao Island by addressing structural, social, and cognitive barriers while targeting the strengthening of adaptive skills and learner resilience.

SUMMARY

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Alternative Learner System (ALS) junior high school learners in Siargao Island to serve as basis for designing a learner-centered intervention program. The data has been collected through interviews with 20 ALS junior high learners supported by 3 parents and 3 teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The lived experiences of the learners, as described by them and corroborated by their parents and teachers, are characterized by a view of education as a second chance for personal growth and empowerment upon enrolling in the ALS program. They navigate barriers to education with resilience and determination, finding support, acceptance, and a sense of shared responsibility within the learning environment to which they belong, especially in their interactions with fellow adult learners and teachers. The challenges they encountered are characterized by structural barriers to educational access, multiple role management and time allocation constraints, and the challenges in self-directed learning and learner self-efficacy they experience. The coping mechanisms and adaptability they employ include adaptive learning and self-management strategies, the social support systems in learning persistence, and the traits of self-motivation, resilience, and commitment to completing their educational journey. The proposed Siargaanon ALS Learners' Support and Empowerment (SALS LSE) Program is a learner-centered program that aims to address these challenges by anchoring on learners' coping mechanisms and adaptability to encourage and support sustainability in their ALS journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS -

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are suggested:

The provision of weekly wellness sessions to the learners participated by their family, neighbors, friends and peers. The wellness session is aimed to address their lived experiences of navigating education with resilience and determination to ensure that they adequately receive the support they need and deserve from their community. This allows a shared responsibility among learners and their community to establish a well-rounded channel where they can discuss experiences with the program. The creation of a specialized committee within the ALS system in the Division level which spearheads the creation of specialized learning materials focused on high-needs subjects such as English, Math and Science. The conduct of a resilience, motivational and personal development workshop designed to strengthen adaptive learning and provides self-management strategies to ALS learners. The adaption of the Siargaanon ALS Learners' Support and Empowerment (SALS LSE) Program in the entirety of ALS Siargao Island to address the gaps found in this study while targeting the strengthening of adaptive skills and learner resilience.

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AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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