Discontinued Journeys: Lived Experiences and Retention Challenges of ALS Learners

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Abstract		Review Article

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) offers a vital second chance for those who need it, education for out-of-school young people and grown-ups in the Philippines, but still, the dropout rates keep falling short of hitting their main goals. This qualitative study, utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach, explored the lived experiences and retention issues faced by former ALS students in grasping responsive concepts of learner-driven retention management intervention. Through in-depth interviews in Cabarroguis, Quirino, we had 25 former students who were part of our study. They managed to capture the personal experiences of their disrupted school journeys. The study was thoroughly examined using a six-step thematic analysis approach with NVivo. The study uncovered four themes: the heavy burden of competition things like serious money troubles, taking care of family and getting stuff done barriers; it's like a never-ending, super-tiring balancing act that's just plain exhausting dissonance between high aspirations and harsh realities; the crucial yet not enough empathetic teacher support; and actionable, learner-driven suggestions for keeping the program going. The research suggests that stopping ALS treatment is fundamentally a socio-economic issue, a decision made out of necessity in the moment survival is what's important, not the absence of wanting to learn. Consequently, effective retention strategies must transcend traditional instructional accommodations by integrating ultra-flexible learning modalities, localized study centers, and pragmatic economic support mechanisms like livelihood training and the institutional provision of learning resources.

Keywords: Learner Retention, Discontinued Learners, Lived Experiences, Phenomenological Approach, Non-formal Education.

Introduction

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) is a key non-formal education approach. A program in the Philippines, carefully crafted to offer a second-chance basic education for out-of-school young and grown-ups who couldn't finish formal schooling. The program offers various ways to get on track to a similar credential and aims to empower underprivileged students with the knowledge and skills needed to better their socio-economic situations (Mehra et al., 2021). Still, even with its welcoming layout and key role in broadening our horizons, ALS programs are still struggling with a lot

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of students dropping out and some pretty tough memory issues. A lot of students who enroll don't succeed in finishing the coursework, holding them back from reaching their learning objectives and making them more likely to fall into poverty.

While existing institutional reports highlight the low completion among ALS enrollees, there remains a distinct gap in the in-depth, qualitative understanding of the situation for people who exit the program. Current literature recognizes that students deal with tough, overlapping issues like managing work, academic requirements, and family responsibilities (Bometivo et al., 2025). However, there is often a dearth of studies focusing on an in-depth case analysis of the specific, personal reasons why students drop out of school. (Subrado et al., 2023). So broad numbers don't really show the details of everyday life.

Without a learner-centered qualitative inquiry, current retention strategies remain generalized and often fail to address the root, multidimensional causes of discontinuation. To address these gaps, this study employs a phenomenological approach to capture the authentic voices and lived experiences of marginalized ALS learners (Labarrete & Tiopes, 2025). By deeply exploring their narratives—specifically how they perceive the support, or lack thereof, from facilitators, families, and communities-the research aims to uncover the fundamental essence of their interrupted educational journeys.

Indeed, extracting these lived experiences is not merely an academic exercise; it serves as a foundational step toward designing and proposing a responsive, evidence-based ALS retention management intervention. By aligning institutional support with the actual needs and realities of the learners, this study hopes to improve future ALS retention and ensure that the promise of a second chance is fully realized.

Hence, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of ALS learners who have discontinued their studies, focusing on the factors that contributed to their withdrawal and the challenges that affected their retention in the program.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically a transcendental phenomenological approach, to explore and understand the lived experiences of ALS learners who discontinued their participation in the program. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it allows an in-depth examination of personal experiences, perceptions, and meanings, which cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone.

The Transcendental Phenomenological research design focuses on describing and interpreting the essence of individuals' lived experiences. It seeks to uncover how ALS learners perceive and make sense of the challenges and factors that contributed to their discontinuation, including personal, socio-economic, and institutional influences. This approach emphasizes the subjective experiences of learners and aims to provide rich, descriptive insights that can inform program improvements and retention strategies.

The study was conducted in the municipality of **Cabarroguis,** province of Quirino. Cabarroguis hosts several ALS Community Learning Centers (CLCs) distributed across town and barangays. These centers cater to diverse groups of learners, working adults, out-of-school youth, parents, and indigenous learners. The municipality's mix of geographical, socio-economic, and cultural conditions provided a relevant setting for exploring ALS dropout experiences. The 25 participants of this study were former ALS learners who were officially enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) but discontinued their participation before completing the program or taking the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) assessment. These learners were selected from the municipality of Cabarroguis, representing a diverse mix of age, gender, educational background, and socio-economic status.

The main instrument used in data collection was an *in- depth interview guide* developed by the researcher. The data collection followed a systematic series of steps:

1. Securing Permissions. The researcher obtained approval from the Barangay Captain and relevant authorities to conduct the study.

2. Identification and Recruitment of Participants. With the help of ALS facilitators, the researcher identified discontinued learners who fit the inclusion criteria. The participants were contacted individually and invited to participate voluntarily.

3. Orientation and Consent. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, procedures, rights of participants, and confidentiality measures. Consent forms were signed before interviews commenced.

4. Conduct of Interviews. **(a)** Interviews were done in a safe, quiet, and convenient location for the participants. (b) Each session lasted 20-25 minutes. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. (c) Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues.

5. Transcription and Verification. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants were allowed to review summaries of their narratives to validate accuracy (member checking). Strict ethical guidelines were observed throughout the duration of the study to prioritize participant welfare and agency. Prior to data collection, researchers provided detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, expected duration, and the nature of participant involvement. This ensured that the formal, written informed consent obtained from each individual was fully informed and strictly voluntary.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study and provides a comprehensive discussion of the results. The data are analyzed and interpreted in relation to the research objectives, highlighting key patterns, trends, and significant insights drawn from the responses.

Table 1. NVivo Thematic Matrix: The Overarching Themes and Nodes

Overarching Theme	Nodes (Sub-Themes)	Core Description	Representative Quotes (Verbatim Evidence)
Theme 1: The Weight of Competing Priorities	1.1 Economic Hardship & Breadwinner Duties	Learners prioritize immediate survival, employment, and earning money to feed their families over their education.	*"I needed to work to support myself and my family, and thus I don't have enough time to study."* (Learner 2)
	1.2 Health, Pregnancy, & Caregiving	Unexpected pregnancies, delicate health conditions, and childcare responsibilities force learners to drop out.	*"I discontinued my studies due to an unexpected pregnancy, and I don't want to be stressed..."* (Learner 20)
	1.3 Logistical & Financial Barriers	The physical distance to the Community Learning Center (CLC), combined with extreme poverty (no fare/allowance), hinders attendance.	*"Due to lack of money for my transportation going to the CLC... they cannot afford to give me money."* (Learner 16)

Theme 2: A Juggling Act of Sacrifice and Aspiration	2.1 Chronic Time Scarcity & Exhaustion	The ALS journey is characterized by extreme physical fatigue from trying to balance heavy farm/construction work or household chores with answering modules.	*"The situation was hard, I had to split my time across all tasks. I needed to budget my time..."* (Learner 3)
	2.2 Dissonance between Aspiration and Reality	Learners view ALS as a beacon of hope and a "second chance" to escape poverty, yet the harsh realities of their daily lives ultimately overpower their educational aspirations.	*"ALS gave me the chance to achieve study goals I thought were impossible. ALS is a source of hope..."* (Learner 25)
Theme 3: The Crucial but Insufficient Lifeline of Teacher Support	3.1 Extraordinary Teacher Dedication	Facilitators go above and beyond traditional roles by personally delivering modules directly to the learners' homes.	*"They themselves deliver the modules needed."* (Learner 3)
	3.2 Compassionate Instructional & Moral Support	Teachers are highly empathetic to the learners' struggles, offering flexible deadlines, emotional encouragement, and personalized tutoring.	*"They always give moral support and motivation so that I can overcome my stress..."* (Learner 20)
Theme 4: Bridging the Gap: Learner-Driven Proposals for Retention	4.1 Adaptive Scheduling & Learning Modalities	Learners strongly advocate for ultra-flexible class schedules, including night classes, weekend sessions, and localized study centers.	*"Offer many options for study schedules such as studying at night, or weekends, and every day off..."* (Learner 12)
	4.2 Integration of Livelihood & Financial Aid	To combat dropout rates due to poverty, learners suggest integrating income-generating livelihood programs and providing basic financial allowances/fare.	*"Hopefully, there will be a livelihood program so we have a source of income..."* (Learner 15)
	4.3 Institutional Provision of Learning Resources	A need for better technological integration, such as providing gadgets, internet access, and free school supplies to ease the academic burden.	*"They should provide me some gadgets for me to connect to the internet."* (Learner 2)

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts reveals a profound narrative of educational aspiration heavily hindered by socio-economic realities. Four major themes emerged that directly address the research objectives regarding the discontinued journeys of ALS learners.

Theme 1: Competing Priorities Leading to Discontinuation

This overarching theme directly addresses SOP 1 and SOP 3 by detailing the life circumstances, turning points, and specific challenges that lead learners to

discontinue the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program. The data strongly indicate that dropping out is rarely a result of a lack of interest in education; rather, it is a forced decision dictated by immediate survival needs.

Subtheme 1.1: Economic Hardship & Breadwinner Duties

The most prominent sub-theme centers on severe financial instability. For adult and out-of-school youth learners, survival takes precedence over education. The responsibility of being the sole provider can feel overwhelming, often leading to emotional exhaustion and immense stress for the breadwinner (BPI AIA, 2025).

Subtheme 1.2: Health, Pregnancy, & Caregiving

Beyond economic labor, domestic and health-related responsibilities form a massive barrier to retention. Offers evidence based guidance for caregiving interventions that support early child development, responsive caregiving, and health during the first three years relevant for adolescent mothers participating in educational programs. (Black, M. M., Britto, P. R., Leckman, J. F., &Jeon g, J., 2020)

Subtheme 1.3: Logistical & Financial Barriers

Even when learners have the time to study, extreme poverty creates insurmountable logistical barriers Santos and Reyes (2021) observed that familial and environmental factors substantially impact learners' persistence and academic performance in alternative education programs.

Theme 2: Lived Experiences and Subjective Realities before Disengagement (Objective 2)

This theme captures the lived experiences of the learners before dropping out and the essence of their interrupted journeys. It paints a picture of intense internal conflict, where deep educational aspirations constantly battle against physical and temporal limitations.

Subtheme 2.1: Chronic Time Scarcity & Exhaustion

The daily reality of an ALS learner is characterized by extreme fatigue. Participants described the immense difficulty of balancing physically demanding jobs these elderly educators are considered the most struggling individuals because they are trying to cope with the newly adopted online teaching, Tariq et al (2019).

Subtheme 2.2: Dissonance between Aspiration and Reality

The essence of their interrupted journey is profoundly bittersweet. Learners view ALS as a vital lifeline - a "second chance" to escape poverty and achieve dreams they had long abandoned. In an educational context, following Ahmed's (2010) proposition that diversity work is atmospheric work, this means that educators must attune to affective dissonance.

Theme 3: The Crucial but Insufficient Lifeline of Teacher Support (Objective 3)

This theme addresses objective 3 by exploring how learners perceive the support systems around them, particularly the ALS facilitators

Subtheme 3.1: Extraordinary Teacher Dedication

ALS facilitators are perceived not just as educators, but as frontline rescue workers for these marginalized students systemic poverty. This requires educators to undergo targeted training and receive support in order for them to provide non-formal education effectively. (Cambridge Assessment, 2021).

Theme 4: The Conflict between Educational Aspiration and Harsh Reality (Objective 4)

This theme synthesizes the actionable interventions proposed by the learners themselves.

Subtheme 4.1: Adaptive Scheduling & Learning Modalities

To accommodate working learners and parents, there is a strong clamor for ultra-flexible class schedules that deviate from traditional school hours. According to Qaisra and Haider (2024), these programs promote professional behaviour, inclusive teaching, and pedagogical excellence. It is important to note that the effectiveness of these training programmes depends on many different factors.

Subtheme 4.2: Integration of Livelihood & Financial Aid

Since economic hardship is the primary cause of dropout, learners argue that retention strategies must include financial components these include the institutional and socio-cultural background, as well as the resources. It is important to continuously assess and adapt training programs in order to respond effectively to the ever-changing challenges that arise from non-formal education (Petrychenko et al., 2023).

Subtheme 4.3: Institutional Provision of Learning Resources

Finally, learners pointed out the need for better material and community support.

Institutional learning resources encompass human, material, digital, and organizational inputs (physical facilities, libraries, laboratories, digital platforms, and instructional staff), all directed toward enabling effective teaching and learning (Wobiandu, 2022; Khaerudin, 2024).

II. Proposed Educational ALS Retention Management Intervention

A. Rationale

The rationale for proposing this intervention is deeply grounded in the lived realities of the ALS learners. The findings reveal that dropout in the ALS program is rarely due to a lack of motivation; rather, it is a forced decision caused by the overwhelming weight of competing priorities, such as extreme poverty, rigid schedules conflicting with hard labor, and a severe lack of resources. Therefore, any effective retention management program must directly address these socio-economic and logistical barriers. By conceptualizing interventions strictly from the learners' own narratives, the resulting program shifts from a traditional, one-size-fits-all academic model to a highly pragmatic, learner-centered support system designed to keep the most vulnerable students enrolled and empowered.

B. Bridging the Gap: Conceptualizing Learner-Driven Proposals for Retention Management

Learner-Identified Challenge (From Findings)	Proposed Learner-Driven Intervention Strategy	Expected Outcome / Impact on Retention
Conflicts with work and household duties	*Adaptive Scheduling & Localized Modalities:* Implementation of ultra-flexible schedules (night classes, weekend sessions) and establishing localized study centers in immediate neighborhoods.	Eliminates transportation barriers and allows learners to study without sacrificing their necessary breadwinner or caregiving duties, thereby reducing chronic fatigue.

Extreme poverty is forcing dropouts	*Integration of Livelihood & Financial Aid:* Embedding income-generating vocational skills into the curriculum and providing basic financial subsidies (e.g., transportation fare/allowances).	Alleviates the immediate financial pressure of attending the Community Learning Center (CLC), turning education into an economic asset rather than a financial burden.
Inability to afford modern education tools	*Institutional Provision & LGU Partnerships:* Partnering with Local Government Units (LGUs) and barangays to provide free internet connectivity, shared gadgets, and better learning spaces.	Bridges the digital divide and fosters a well-resourced community environment, ensuring learners have the tools necessary to complete self-paced modules.

The proposed learner-driven retention management program operates on the premise that educational persistence in non-formal systems is inextricably linked to socio-economic survival. To effectively bridge the gap between learner aspirations and their harsh daily realities, the intervention must be holistic—merging academic flexibility with tangible socio-economic and institutional support.

Recent literature strongly supports this integrated approach. The passage of the Alternative Learning System Act (Republic Act 11510) in 2020 explicitly recognized the need for highly flexible learning options and community-responsive resource allocation to keep marginalized learners engaged (DepEd, 2020). However, as the learners in this study explicitly noted, structural flexibility alone is insufficient without targeted economic intervention. Integrating livelihood training and direct financial aid—such as transportation allowances, addresses the primary catalyst for dropout. Magsayo and Galibo (2025) affirm this in their recent phenomenological exploration of ALS learners, finding that action plans that enhance employability, entrepreneurial readiness, and provide financial subsidies are highly critical for improving educational retention and resilience.

Furthermore, the learners' demand for adaptive scheduling and localized resources aligns with contemporary best practices for adult non-formal education. Addressing low retention requires moving beyond traditional printed modules toward blended, localized learning hubs, backed by institutional provisions like gadget lending and LGU-sponsored internet access (Idulsa, 2023). Cagang (2024) similarly emphasizes that strong partnerships with local government units and industry stakeholders are necessary to provide both the physical facilities and the financial safety nets that out-of-school youth and adults desperately need. By actively implementing these learner-proposed strategies, ALS implementers can transform Community Learning Centers from mere instructional spaces into comprehensive community support hubs, ensuring that learners are no longer forced to choose between their basic survival and their right to an education.

The study concludes that the discontinuation of ALS learners is driven primarily by socio-economic survival rather than academic disengagement, where leaving school reflects not a lack of aspiration but a necessary sacrifice to meet immediate family and livelihood needs. This reveals a profound dissonance between learners' strong educational aspirations and the harsh realities of poverty, as ALS is viewed as a beacon of hope yet remains overshadowed by daily survival demands. While the dedication and personalized support of ALS facilitators provide an essential lifeline for marginalized learners, such

instructional efforts alone are insufficient. Therefore, effective retention in the ALS program requires learner-centered strategies that are deeply grounded in the lived experiences, constraints, and realities of the learners themselves.

The findings of this study offer several critical implications for the management and administration of the Alternative Learning System, particularly in addressing the socio-economic barriers that drive dropout rates. To effectively retain marginalized learners, ALS implementers must move beyond traditional instructional methods and institutionalize adaptive, ultra-flexible learning modalities, such as night classes and localized study centers within immediate neighborhoods. The necessity for such flexibility is supported by the Alternative Learning System Act, which mandates community-responsive learning options to keep vulnerable populations engaged (Department of Education, 2020). However, structural flexibility must be paired with direct economic intervention. Because financial hardship is the primary catalyst for discontinuation, the ALS curriculum must integrate income-generating vocational skills and livelihood programs.

Hence, this aligns with recent studies emphasizing that action plans that enhance employability and provide financial subsidies are highly critical for improving educational retention and resilience (Magsayo & Galibo, 2025). Furthermore, addressing the logistical and material burdens of modern education requires strong institutional partnerships. ALS programs must actively collaborate with local government units (LGUs) to secure funding, provide essential technological resources like shared gadgets and internet access, and conduct broader community literacy mapping. As recent literature highlights, establishing these localized hubs and LGU-backed safety nets is essential for transforming non-formal education into a sustainable, accessible pathway for adult learners (Cagang, 2024; Idulsa & Luzano, 2024).

Acknowledgment

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