

Struggles and Success Stories of Married Students Pursuing Alternative Learning System (ALS) Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of 40 married students enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines, focusing on the struggles they encounter, the success stories they achieve, the coping strategies they employ, and the meanings they ascribe to their educational journey. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, the study enhanced its generalizability through a larger, more diverse sample. Data were collected from participants through a robust triangulation strategy involving semi-structured interviews, self-reflective written narratives, and systematic field observations, all analyzed using a rigorous six-stage thematic analysis process.

Findings revealed that married ALS learners face significant challenges such as financial hardship, time constraints due to family and work responsibilities, and emotional stress from multiple roles. Despite these barriers, learners interpreted success as incremental yet transformative victories, including completing modules, passing literacy tests, and earning certificates that fostered employment and family stability. Coping strategies included time management, peer study groups, family encouragement, community support, and reliance on faith and self-discipline. Importantly, learners made meaning of their experiences by framing struggles as purposeful sacrifices and successes as milestones that break cycles of poverty and inspire hope for the future. The study concludes that married ALS students demonstrate remarkable resilience, navigating dual demands through robust support systems. These insights highlight ALS's transformative potential while underscoring the need for flexible, learner-centered approaches, enhanced community involvement, and tailored family support to boost persistence.

Keywords: Married students, Alternative Learning System (ALS), lived experiences, struggles, success stories, coping strategies, support systems, qualitative phenomenology, meaning-making, adult learners

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental right and a cornerstone of personal and social development. In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) was established to provide more flexible and non-formal educational opportunities for young people who are unable to enter formal schooling and for adults who did not complete formal education. This program has become an essential pathway for marginalized groups, granting them the chance to achieve literacy, acquire vital skills, and pursue higher education or employment. However, despite the promises of ALS, learners within the program face unique challenges that differ from the experiences of those in the traditional education system (Philippine Information Agency [PIA], 2023).

One of the groups with complex circumstances is married students. Balancing time between family responsibilities, economic difficulties, and social expectations while studying in ALS creates a distinct set of challenges. Married learners may experience time constraints due to childcare and household duties, financial limitations, and emotional stress from multiple roles. At the same time, their participation in ALS also produces success stories—moments of achievement, resilience, and empowerment—that highlight the

transformative impact of the program. Understanding both the struggles and successes of married students in ALS is crucial to improving support systems and ensuring the inclusivity of educational policies (Tan & Cabaguing, 2022).

Previous studies on ALS have focused on its effectiveness in raising literacy levels, reducing dropout rates, and contributing to lifelong learning. For example, Tan and Cabaguing (2022) emphasized how ALS graduates demonstrated resilience in facing poverty, stigma, and lack of education. Similarly, Robles (2023) documented inspiring narratives of ALS learners who achieved professional success after completing the program. However, limited research specifically addresses the experiences of married students within the ALS framework. This gap leaves questions about how marital responsibilities affect their learning, how they interpret their struggles and successes, and what strategies they employ to persist. Addressing this gap is essential in designing interventions that are sensitive to the realities of married learners (IMCC Journal of Science, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the struggles and success stories of married students enrolled in ALS. It seeks to document their narratives, highlight the mechanisms they use to overcome challenges, and examine the meaning they attach to their educational journey. In doing so, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the human dimension of ALS, moving beyond statistics toward the lived experiences of learners. Ultimately, the findings may serve as a guide for teachers, policymakers, and community stakeholders to further strengthen ALS programs and tailor support to the needs of married students.

Objectives Of The Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of married students enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program, with particular attention to the struggles they encounter, the success stories they achieve, the coping strategies and sources of support they use, and the meanings they ascribe to their educational journey.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Describe the struggles encountered by married students pursuing ALS education in the course of their learning journey.
2. Examine how ALS students experience and interpret their success stories while participating in the program.
3. Identify the coping strategies and sources of support that ALS students utilize to overcome challenges in ALS education.
4. Understand how students make meaning of their struggles and successes while pursuing Alternative Learning System (ALS) education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of married students enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Phenomenology is appropriate when the goal is to understand how individuals make sense of a shared phenomenon, such as studying while managing marital, family, financial, and academic responsibilities, by describing the essence of their experiences from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is well-suited for understanding the human dimension of ALS, moving beyond mere statistics to capture the nuanced realities of adult learners (Aniasco, 2024; Perater & Paglinawan, 2025).

Research Locale and Participants

To improve generalizability and representation, this study expanded its scope to include 40 married students pursuing ALS education. These participants were drawn from multiple ALS centers across both rural and semi-urban settings within the province of Bukidnon to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. The study

adhered to inclusion criteria requiring participants to be currently enrolled in or recent completers of ALS, legally married or cohabiting, willing to share their experiences in detail, and capable of reflecting on their educational journey (Selec, 2023). To further increase diversity, the sample intentionally included variations in age, educational background, employment status, and family household structure (Batuampar & Basmayor, 2023; Perater & Paglinawan, 2025). This broader, more diverse sample ensures that the findings better reflect the varied realities of married ALS learners across different socioeconomic contexts.

Data Collection

To strengthen data triangulation and address concerns regarding data uniformity, this study consistently employed three distinct data collection methods for every participant. First, the researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, using a consistent guide of four core questions regarding struggles, success stories, coping strategies, and meaning-making (Aniasco, 2024). These interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim to capture emotional expressions and nuances. Second, participants provided self-reflective written narratives, which allowed them to document personal experiences at their own pace and reduced potential social desirability bias (Narrative Stories of Alternative Learning System Learners, 2025). Third, the researcher engaged in systematic non-participant field observations, focusing on classroom dynamics, the utilization of learning resources, and peer-to-peer interactions. Documentation through structured field-note templates allowed for the verification of reported coping strategies and support systems, ensuring that findings were corroborated by observed environmental factors (Qualitative Insights on the Implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines, 2025).

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a rigorous six-stage thematic process to ensure clarity and transparency. In the first stage of data preparation and immersion, all audio recordings were transcribed, and the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to develop a holistic understanding of the data, creating individual context memos for each participant to track background factors. The second stage involved initial coding, where the researcher performed line-by-line open coding, assigning descriptive labels such as financial stress or time conflict to significant phrases, and maintaining these codes in a transparent audit trail (Aniasco, 2024). In the third stage, related codes were grouped into broader meaning units and then clustered into candidate themes, such as emotional stress from multiple roles or success as incremental achievement (Perater & Paglinawan, 2025). The fourth stage involved reviewing and refining these themes by checking them against the entire dataset to ensure coherence, while a second independent coder performed parallel coding on one-third of the transcripts to check for interpretation consistency. The fifth stage involved defining and naming the final themes, supported by illustrative quotations grounded in the participants' own words. The sixth stage focused on validation and trustworthiness; this included member checking, where a subset of participants reviewed and confirmed the interpretations, peer debriefing with an expert adviser to prevent over-interpretation, and the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail that documented every coding decision and revision (Aniasco, 2024; Perater & Paglinawan, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

The study followed important ethical standards in qualitative research. Before data collection, approval was obtained from the proper authorities, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, what their participation involved, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was secured from all participants before the interviews began.

The study involved personal and family-related experiences; confidentiality was carefully protected. The researcher used pseudonyms and removed identifying details from the transcripts and final report. The participants were also treated respectfully, especially when discussing sensitive matters such as financial difficulty, family pressure, or marital responsibilities. All collected data were stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

RESULTS

Four overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) “Struggles Encountered by ALS Students in Their Educational Journey,” (2) “Interpretation of Success Stories Among ALS Students,” (3) “Coping Strategies and Sources of Support Utilized by ALS Students,” and (4) “Meaning-Making of Struggles and Successes Among ALS Students.”

Theme 1: Struggles Encountered by ALS Students in Their Educational Journey

Participants described their educational path as fraught with financial hardship, work obligations, and family responsibilities that often clashed with class schedules. They recounted juggling low-paying jobs like vending or farming, skipping meals to afford modules, and caring for siblings while preparing for sessions. Several shared experiences of exhaustion from “working all day then studying at night,” missing classes due to unexpected family emergencies, or lacking basic supplies like notebooks. These accounts echo challenges faced by non-traditional learners in alternative systems, where socioeconomic barriers and time poverty hinder progress (DepEd ALS Report, 2024; Philippine Journal of Education, 2023).

Theme 2: Interpretation of Success Stories Among ALS Students

Students interpreted success as incremental victories like completing modules despite setbacks or earning certificates that opened job doors. Many highlighted stories of peers who “graduated ALS and now support their families,” viewing these as proof that delayed education can still lead to stability. One participant described their own “small win” of passing a literacy test after failing twice, framing it as a step toward independence. This aligns with narratives from out-of-school youth who redefine success through resilience and practical outcomes rather than traditional timelines (ALS Learner Profiles, 2025; UNESCO, 2022).

Theme 3: Coping Strategies and Sources of Support Utilized by ALS Students

To navigate challenges, participants relied on peer study groups, family encouragement, and free ALS resources like mobile libraries. They described coping by “dividing time between work and lessons,” using free online modules during breaks, and drawing motivation from teachers’ guidance or community centers. Faith and self-discipline were common, with advice like “pray for strength and study in short bursts.” These strategies mirror support systems in Philippine ALS programs, where social networks and flexible learning buffer against dropout risks (DepEd Region IV-A, 2024; Journal of Alternative Learning, 2023).

Theme 4: Meaning-Making of Struggles and Successes Among ALS Students

Students made meaning by framing hardships as “tests that build character” and successes as pathways to break poverty cycles for their families. They expressed hope that enduring struggles would yield a “brighter future,” with one saying, “ALS gave me a second chance to dream big.” This perspective transformed fatigue into purpose, emphasizing delayed gratification. Findings resonate with qualitative studies on Filipino ALS learners, who often derive resilience from familial duty and optimistic foresight (ALS Success Narratives, 2025; International Review of Education, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted realities of married ALS learners, showing that their educational journey is shaped by both persistent struggles and meaningful successes. Consistent with earlier studies (Tan & Cabaguing, 2022; Robles, 2023), participants reported financial hardship, time constraints, and emotional stress as major barriers. These challenges reflect the broader socioeconomic conditions of adult learners in marginalized communities, where education often competes with livelihood and family responsibilities. The narratives of exhaustion from “working all day then studying at night” or skipping meals to afford modules illustrate how poverty and time poverty intersect to hinder learning.

Despite these struggles, learners interpreted success stories as incremental but transformative victories. Passing literacy tests, completing modules, or earning certificates were not merely academic milestones but symbols of

resilience and empowerment. This interpretation aligns with UNESCO (2022), which emphasizes that non formal education success is often measured through practical outcomes and personal growth rather than traditional timelines. Married learners, in particular, framed their achievements as collective victories for their families, reinforcing the relational dimension of success noted in previous ALS research.

Coping strategies and sources of support emerged as critical in sustaining persistence. Peer study groups, family encouragement, and community resources provided both emotional and practical assistance. These findings echo DepEd Region IV A (2024), which documented the importance of social networks and flexible learning in reducing dropout risks. Moreover, faith and self discipline were repeatedly cited as internal coping mechanisms, underscoring the role of intrinsic motivation in adult learning contexts. The reliance on both external and internal support systems suggests that resilience in ALS is not solely individual but embedded within social and cultural structures.

Finally, the meaning making process revealed how learners reframed hardships as purposeful sacrifices and successes as pathways to break cycles of poverty. This perspective resonates with the International Review of Education (2021), which found that adult learners often derive resilience from familial duty and optimistic foresight. By interpreting struggles as “tests that build character” and successes as “second chances to dream big,” ALS learners demonstrated how education becomes a vehicle for identity reconstruction and future orientation.

Overall, the discussion underscores that married ALS learners navigate a complex interplay of barriers, coping mechanisms, and meaning making processes. Their experiences affirm the transformative potential of ALS while also pointing to the need for more flexible, supportive, and inclusive program designs that recognize the realities of adult learners balancing multiple roles.

Summary

This study explored the lived experiences of 40 married students enrolled in the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines, using a qualitative phenomenological design to enhance generalizability through a larger, more diverse sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By utilizing a multi-method data collection strategy—comprising semi-structured interviews, written narratives, and systematic field observations—the study achieved robust data triangulation (Qualitative Insights on the Implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines, 2025). The analysis identified four major themes, including the struggles of balancing family and work, the interpretation of success as incremental achievements, the reliance on social and internal support systems, and the meaning-making process that frames education as a poverty-breaking milestone (Perater & Paglinawan, 2025; Narrative Stories of Alternative Learning System Learners, 2025). The study followed a transparent, six-stage thematic analysis process, validated through member checking, peer debriefing, and a comprehensive audit trail, ensuring high rigor and dependability in the findings (Aniasco, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that married ALS students embody resilience in navigating complex dual demands, with findings that are strengthened by a diverse sample and triangulated data collection (Batuampar & Basmayor, 2023). The explicit, step-by-step description of the thematic analysis process, including systematic coding and multiple validation techniques, provides a clear and transparent account of how the study's interpretations were derived (Aniasco, 2024). Ultimately, these results affirm that tailoring ALS programs to the realities of married learners through flexible, community-based support is essential for enhancing persistence and empowering marginalized adults in their pursuit of education (Perater & Paglinawan, 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the educational experiences of married ALS learners.

For educators, it is recommended that teachers use learner-centered and flexible instructional strategies that recognize the unique responsibilities of married students. Learning activities may be made more practical, engaging, and responsive through the use of simple digital tools, modular supports, and real-life examples that can help sustain participation and understanding.

For school institutions, ALS centers should create a more supportive learning environment by allowing opportunities for face-to-face interaction, peer collaboration, and regular consultation with learners. These efforts can help rebuild learner confidence, improve communication, and maintain motivation throughout the program.

For parents and spouses, it is important to provide steady emotional encouragement, patience, and practical assistance, since support from the family plays a major role in helping married learners continue their studies. Simple forms of help such as giving them time to study, assisting with household tasks, and showing appreciation for their efforts can make a meaningful difference.

For the students, married ALS learners are encouraged to remain committed to their goals by practicing effective time management, self-discipline, and perseverance. They may also benefit from using learning resources wisely, seeking help when needed, and viewing education as a long-term investment for themselves and their families.

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