

Lived Experiences of Learners in the Alternative Learning System (ALS)

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of learners in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) Thematic Analysis, the study examined the educational journeys, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations of eight (8) ALS learners through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that learners encountered financial constraints, family responsibilities, limited learning resources, and social stigma, yet remained committed to pursuing education through resilience, self-determination, and support from their families, peers, and ALS teachers. The study highlights the vital role of ALS in providing accessible and inclusive learning opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults. The findings may serve as a basis for strengthening learner support programs and improving the implementation of ALS to better address the diverse needs of its learners.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System (ALS); Lived Experiences; Out-of-School Youth and Adults; Learner Resilience; Inclusive Education

INTRODUCTION

This reality highlights the continuing challenge of achieving equitable access to education. Although education is recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development, millions of children, youth, and adults worldwide remain excluded from formal schooling due to poverty, geographic isolation, family responsibilities, conflict, and other socio-economic barriers (UNESCO, 2022).

To address these challenges, many countries have developed alternative and non-formal education programs that provide flexible learning opportunities for individuals who are unable to participate in traditional schooling. These programs promote educational inclusion and lifelong learning by accommodating the diverse needs and circumstances of marginalized learners (UNESCO, 2023).

In the Philippines, educational exclusion remains a significant concern. The 2022 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reported that approximately 10.6 million Filipinos aged 5 to 24 are classified as out-of-school youth and adults (OSYAs). In response, the Philippine government strengthened the Alternative Learning System (ALS), a non-formal education program that provides flexible and accessible learning opportunities for learners who are unable to complete basic education through the formal school system. The implementation of Republic Act No. 11510 (Alternative Learning System Act) and the Enhanced ALS 2.0 curriculum further reinforced the government's commitment to providing inclusive, quality, and learner-centered education.

Despite the growing body of research on the Alternative Learning System, existing studies have largely focused on program implementation, curriculum, and learner outcomes. Comparatively, limited qualitative research has examined the lived experiences of ALS learners, particularly how they overcome educational challenges, remain motivated, and make meaning of their educational journeys. Furthermore, localized studies exploring these experiences within specific communities remain scarce.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System in

the Schools Division of Bago City, Negros Occidental. By examining their educational journeys, challenges, coping strategies, and personal meanings attached to learning, the study seeks to contribute to the limited body of localized qualitative literature and provide insights that may help strengthen the implementation of the ALS program and improve support for its learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) at a selected public ALS learning center in the Schools Division of Bago City, Negros Occidental, during School Year 2025–2026. The study focused primarily on the first-person narratives of eight (8) ALS learners, with data gathered through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and a complementary focus group discussion (FGD) with selected community stakeholders. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants who met the established inclusion criteria, including active ALS enrollment, being 18 years old and above, voluntary participation, at least three months of continuous attendance in the current ALS cycle, and residence within the community served by the Schools Division of Bago City. The FGD involved ALS facilitators, barangay officials, and a Youth Development Coordinator who provided contextual perspectives on the learning environment, support systems, and challenges surrounding ALS implementation.

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions that explored the learners' educational experiences, motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and aspirations. A separate FGD guide was used to obtain complementary stakeholder perspectives, while field notes and observation records were maintained to document relevant contextual and non-verbal information. The research process adhered to the principles of qualitative trustworthiness, particularly credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through member checking, prolonged engagement, and probing questions; dependability through systematic documentation and an audit trail; confirmability through reflexive practices and grounding interpretations in participants' narratives; and transferability through thick descriptions of the research context and participants' experiences.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Interview recordings and transcripts were repeatedly reviewed, significant statements were coded, and related codes were organized into broader themes representing recurring patterns in the learners' experiences. The emerging themes were systematically reviewed against the coded data and complete transcripts to ensure coherence and fidelity to participants' accounts. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research objectives and supported by selected participant quotations. Throughout the study, ethical principles were observed by securing informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, protecting participant confidentiality, and maintaining the privacy and anonymity of the learners and stakeholders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1. The Anatomy of Educational Displacement

This theme explores the structural vulnerabilities and personal disorienting dilemmas that disrupted the participants' mainstream formal school trajectories, causing temporary educational displacement before their entry into the Alternative Learning System (ALS).

Sub-theme 1.1. Intersecting Socio-Economic and Labor Pressures

For the majority of male participants, formal schooling was cut short by an immediate need to join the informal labor sector to support their families. This reflects a state of absolute financial precarity where survival needs override long-term educational goals.

"Sa ALS ko nag-enrol kay naga ubra ko kada adlaw kag ang klasi ko sa ALS kada lunes lang."

(I enrolled in ALS because I work every day, and my classes in ALS are only on Mondays.)

— Sinag, 16

"May Responsibilidad sa Pamilya, Kinanglan mag ubra kag suportaran ang ginikanaan."

(I have family responsibilities; I needed to work and support my parents.)

— Alab, 26

"Sa ALS man ko gaeskwela kay gaubra man ko kada-adlaw. Once a week lang ang klasi."

(I study in ALS because I work every single day. Classes are held only once a week.)

— Dakila., 23

The findings reveal that the participants' decision to enroll in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) was largely influenced by economic hardship and family responsibilities, which required them to work instead of attending formal school. The flexibility of ALS enabled them to continue their education while meeting their daily livelihood needs. These experiences are consistent with the findings of Maglangit and Abao (2023), who reported that many ALS learners balance education with work and household responsibilities, as well as UNICEF Philippines (2022), which identified poverty and financial constraints as major barriers to educational participation. Similarly, Aniasco (2024) and Beltran (2025) noted that many learners prioritize income-generating activities over formal schooling due to economic necessity. These findings demonstrate that socio-economic pressures remain a significant factor influencing learners' educational pathways and underscore the importance of ALS as a flexible and accessible learning option for out-of-school youth and adult learners.

Sub-theme 1.2. The Weight of Domestic and Domestic-Familial Commitments

For female participants, domestic obligations and managing independent small-scale family businesses served as primary structural barriers to formal schooling.

"Sa ALS lang ko nag enroll tungod ang responsibilidad sa pamilya. Mas mayo sa ALS, once a week lang ang klasi, kag may time ko para sa pamilya ko."

(I only enrolled in ALS because of family responsibilities. It is better in ALS because classes are only once a week, and I have time for my family.)

— Liwanag, 33

"ALS program ako naga eskwela kay wala bantay akon tyangge. Sa isa Ka semana kis-a lang kami mag school, amo na nga ALS lang ko nag enroll."

(I am studying in the ALS program because no one would look after my small variety store. We only go to school once a week, which is why I enrolled in ALS.)

— Hiraya, 37

The findings indicate that domestic responsibilities and family livelihood obligations significantly influenced the participants' decision to enroll in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). For these female learners, the flexibility of ALS allowed them to balance their educational aspirations with caregiving responsibilities and managing small family businesses. These findings are consistent with Maglangit and Abao (2023), who found that ALS learners often struggle to balance education with household and economic responsibilities. Likewise, UNICEF Philippines (2022) reported that family obligations and financial constraints frequently disrupt participation in formal education. The flexible learning delivery of ALS enables learners to continue their education while fulfilling essential family and livelihood

responsibilities, demonstrating its important role in promoting inclusive and accessible education for non-traditional learners.

Theme 2. The Structural Architecture of Non-Formal Learning

This theme examines how the structural mechanics of ALS address the realities of non-traditional students, modifying traditional educational models to make learning accessible despite ongoing work and family demands.

Sub-theme 2.1. Temporal Flexibility as an Instrument of Empowerment

The single most prevalent structural benefit identified by all eight participants was the program's once-a-week schedule, which directly addresses the issue of time poverty.

[Traditional Schooling] ---> Demands 5 Full Days ---> Causes Total Loss of Daily Income

[Alternative Learning] ---> Demands 1 Flexible Day ---> Safely Preserves Livelihood

"Mas hapos kay may time ka sa ubra kag may time sap ag eskwela."

(It is easier because you have time for work and time for school.)

— Matikas, 18

"Mas hapos sa ALS kay sa isa ka semana kaisa ka lang gid ya mag school kag may time ka sa imo ubra."

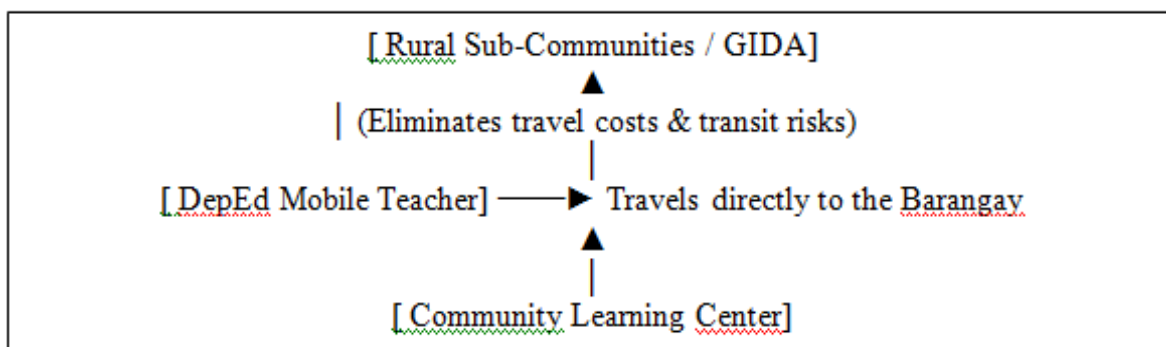
(It is much easier in ALS because you only go to school once a week, leaving you with time for your job.)

— Sulong, 19

Research results show that the flexible schedule of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) empowers learners to balance education with work and other responsibilities. The once-a-week class arrangement enables participants to continue earning a living while pursuing their education, making learning more accessible and manageable. These findings support the literature that describes ALS as a flexible learning pathway designed to meet the needs of out-of-school youth and adults who cannot participate in the formal school system due to work and family obligations. Similarly, Maglangit and Abao (2023) emphasized that many ALS learners balance education with employment and household responsibilities, while UNESCO (2023) recognized flexible learning as an essential strategy for promoting educational inclusion among marginalized learners. Consistent with the Theory of Andragogy (Loeng, 2022), the flexibility of ALS allows adult and non-traditional learners to pursue education while fulfilling their personal and economic responsibilities, fostering greater learner autonomy.

Sub-theme 2.2. Decentralized and De-territorialized Mobile Pedagogy

A major finding regarding institutional implementation in Bago City is the elimination of physical distance barriers through mobile teachers who travel directly into rural neighborhoods.



"Mas hapos sa ALS kay si Ma'am ang gakadto sa amon Barangay."

(It is much easier in ALS because our teacher is the one who comes to our Barangay.)

— Sinag, 16

"Wala ko problema sa ALS kay si Ma'am ang galakat sa amon..."

(I have no problems with ALS because it is our teacher who walks and travels to us...)

— Dakila, 23

"Wala ko problema sa pagsulod ko sa ALS kay amon maestra gakadto sa amon lugar... amo na hindi budlay para sakon."

(I have no problem attending ALS because our teacher goes directly to our area... that is why it is not difficult for me.)

— Hiraya, 37

The study reveals that the community-based delivery of the Alternative Learning System (ALS), through mobile teachers who travel directly to learners' barangays, significantly improves access to education by reducing transportation and distance-related barriers. This approach enables learners from geographically isolated communities to participate in education without the burden of traveling to formal schools. These findings are consistent with the literature, which highlights that ALS mobile teachers play a vital role in reaching underserved communities despite geographical and resource constraints (DepEd, 2022; Tadeo & Alieto, 2023). Likewise, localized implementation studies by Beltran (2025) and Mahinay (2025) emphasize that mobile teachers are essential in sustaining learning opportunities in remote areas. The findings demonstrate that bringing education closer to learners promotes greater accessibility and strengthens the inclusive implementation of the ALS program.

Theme 3: Interpersonal and Socio-Emotional Transmutations

This theme maps how the participants' relationships changed during their time in the program, highlighting how collaborative spaces helped shift feelings of isolation into shared supportive experiences.

Sub-theme 3.1. Relational Integration and Collaborative Peer Learning

Participants highlighted peer-to-peer group discussions as a valuable space for learning. These sessions allowed them to share knowledge, exchange diverse perspectives, and build confidence through teamwork.

"Mas gusto ko ang Group Discussion kay pwede kapamangkot simo upod kung ano to sa lesson ang indi mo ma inchindihan."

(I prefer Group Discussions because you can freely ask your peers about parts of the lesson you could not understand.)

— Sinag, 16

"Ang Group Discussion. Kung Grupo ya, kada isa sa amon may kinaiya nga idea. Paagi sa Idea nila maka kwa man ko kag ma share ko man akon idea."

(Group Discussion helps best. When in a group, each of us has a unique idea. Through their ideas, I gain insights, and I can share my own ideas as well.)

— Liwanag, 33

"Group discussion kay namian gid ko kay ga cooperate gid tanan kag kung ano ang 7799ind imo mabal-an mapamangkot mo sa imo upod."

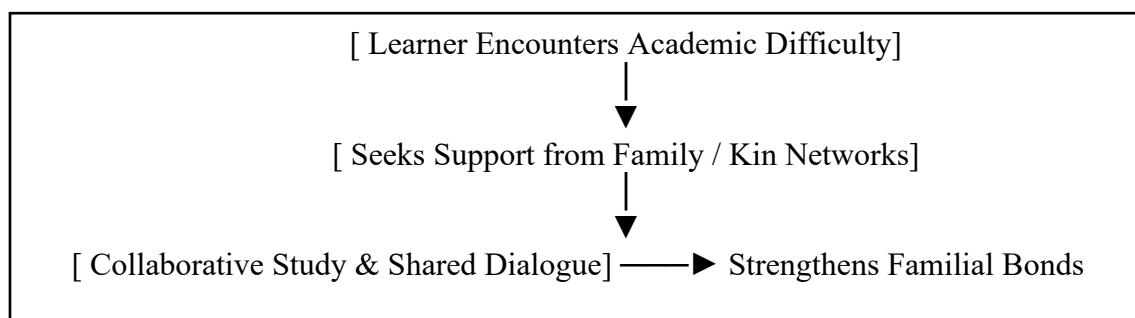
(I really like group discussion because everyone truly cooperates, and whatever you do not know, you can simply ask your peers.)

— Dakila, 23

Research findings indicate that group discussions provide learners with opportunities to collaborate, exchange ideas, and seek assistance from their peers, thereby enhancing their understanding and confidence. Through these collaborative learning experiences, participants develop stronger interpersonal relationships and become more actively engaged in the learning process. These findings support the literature, which identifies peer encouragement and supportive learning environments as important factors in sustaining learner engagement and promoting academic persistence among ALS learners (Tindoin et al., 2023; Delos Santos, 2024). Likewise, Aniasco (2024) reported that positive social interactions help learners build self-confidence and resilience despite the challenges they encounter. Consistent with Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2023), observing and interacting with peers enables learners to strengthen their self-efficacy and confidence as they learn from one another in a supportive environment.

Sub-theme 3.2: Familial and Socio-Emotional Interdependence

The study revealed that entering the ALS program often strengthened family relationships, creating opportunities for academic connection and shared pride within the household.



"Nakapa-uswag ang relasyon sa Pamilya kay kung wla ko mainchindihan sa modules pamangkot ko sila kag permi kami gaestoryahanay."

(It improved my relationship with my family because if there is something I cannot understand in the modules, I ask them, and we talk more frequently.)

— Sinag, 16

"Tungod sa ALS, na close ko na akon Bayaw kay kung hindi ko kabalo sila akon napalapitan kag pamangkotan..."

(Because of ALS, I became close to my brother-in-law because when I do not know the answers, they are the ones I approach and ask...)

— Liwanag, 33

"Nag baskog ang pamilya tungod sa ALS... Nag close gid ko sa akon pamilya."

(The family grew stronger because of ALS... I became very close to my family.)

— Alab, 26

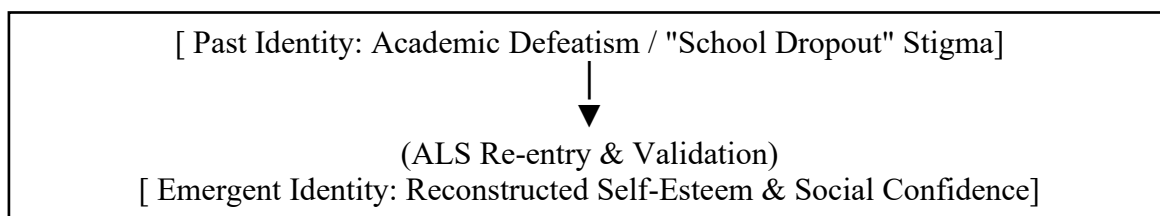
The findings reveal that participation in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) strengthened family relationships by fostering communication, mutual support, and shared involvement in the learners' educational journey. Participants viewed their families as important sources of encouragement and assistance, particularly in completing learning tasks and overcoming academic challenges. These findings are consistent with the literature, which identifies family support as a key factor in sustaining learner motivation and persistence in the ALS program (Tindoin et al., 2023; Delos Santos, 2024). Likewise, Aniasco (2024) emphasized that strong family support contributes to learners' resilience and positive educational experiences. The findings suggest that ALS not only promotes educational development but also strengthens family relationships by encouraging active participation and support throughout the learning process.

Theme 4. Existential Reclamation, Resilience, and Future Horizon

This theme explores the deeper personal changes experienced by the participants as they rebuilt their confidence, learned to navigate resource shortages, and reshaped their personal goals.

Sub-theme 4.1. Psychological Empowerment and Self-Concept Reconstruction

Returning to education helped participants move past the stigma of being labeled a "dropout," allowing them to rebuild their self-esteem and social confidence.



"Damo nag bag-o sakon kabuhi kag may ipadayaw na ko may tinaposan ko."

(A lot changed in my life, and now I have something to be proud of—that I have achieved an educational completion.)

— Liwanag, 33

"Nagta-as ang kumpyansa sa kaugalingon ko."

(My confidence in myself significantly increased.)

— Alab, 26

"Gin tagaan ko confidence sang ALS... kag may ipadayaw na ko sa mga mego ko... para hindi ako maulihi sa ila."

(ALS gave me confidence... and now I have something to show my friends... so I will no longer feel left behind by them.)

— Dakila., 23

"Tungod sa ALS, nakapaayo sa akon kumpyansa nga kung may mamangkot kung ano ang tinaposan ko, may kumpyansa gid ko ya sa kaugalingon ko..."

(Because of ALS, it improved my confidence so that when someone asks what my educational attainment is, I have genuine confidence in myself...)

— Hiraya, 37

These narratives align with Transformative Learning Theory, illustrating how second-chance education allows learners to reconsider self-limiting beliefs and build a more empowered sense of social identity.

Sub-theme 4.2: Resource Deficits and Material Adaptations

Despite the dedication of mobile teachers, participants noted that a lack of personal funds and learning materials remains an ongoing challenge.

"Kulang sa materyales, Budlay wala kwarta, indi ka maka eskwela, syempre ma absent ka."

(We lack materials; it is hard when you do not have money, you cannot go to school, and of course, you end up absent.)

— Alab, 26

"Materials and problema kay wla ko lapis kag papel, pero si mam gahatag sa amon."

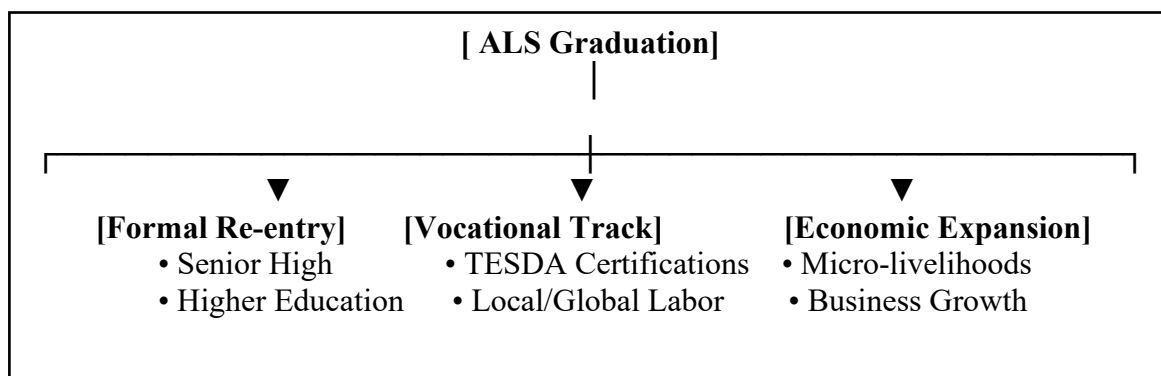
(Materials are the problem because I lack pencils and paper, but our teacher is the one who provides them for us.)

— Tibay, 22

The results indicate that participation in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) positively transformed the learners by increasing their self-confidence, improving their self-image, and giving them a sense of accomplishment despite persistent financial and material challenges. These findings are consistent with Bautista and Palisoc (2022), who found that ALS provides opportunities for personal and educational advancement, while Aniasco (2024) emphasized that the program enhances learners' self-esteem and resilience. However, the participants' experiences also reflect the continuing impact of limited financial resources and learning materials, which remain significant barriers to educational participation (PIDS, 2022; UNICEF Philippines, 2022). These findings highlight that while ALS empowers learners to rebuild confidence and pursue their educational goals, sustained institutional support is essential to address the resource constraints they continue to face.

Sub-theme 4.3. Vocational Skills Integration and Future Horizons

When looking toward the future, the participants expressed clear goals focused on finishing their basic education, acquiring vocational skills, or returning to mainstream schooling.



"Mabalik ko sa Regular class... Ma continue ko pag-eskwela sa Senior High School sa Bago City."

— Sinag, 16 & Liwanag, 33

"After sa ALS, maeskwela ko sa TESDA, makwa NC II WELDING basi pa lang maka pa abroad ta."

(After ALS, I will study at TESDA to get an NC II in Welding, hoping it might help me work abroad.)

— Dakila, 23

"Ang ALS nakabulig gid sa akon adlaw-adlaw nga pag negosyo... Skills Training bisan pa wala ubra makakita ka pamaagi, mabaligya ang paypay kag Dishwashing liquid."

(ALS truly helps in my daily business... Skills training helps you find a way even without a formal job, like selling fans and dishwashing liquid.)

— Hiraya, 37

The study shows that the participants viewed the Alternative Learning System (ALS) as a pathway to further education, vocational training, and improved employment opportunities. Their aspirations to pursue senior high school, enroll in TESDA, and apply the skills gained through ALS reflect their desire to achieve a better future. These findings are consistent with Bautista and Palisoc (2022), who found that ALS enables learners to pursue higher education, technical-vocational training, and better career opportunities. Similarly, the skills training provided by ALS equips learners with practical competencies that support livelihood and self-employment, demonstrating the program's role in promoting lifelong learning and socio-economic advancement.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

The study concludes that economic hardship, employment demands, and family responsibilities were major factors that disrupted the participants' formal education. ALS provided an alternative opportunity for learners who could not sustain regular schooling because of their personal and family circumstances.

The study concludes that the flexible schedule and community-based delivery of ALS made education more accessible and manageable for the participants. The once-a-week classes and mobile teachers helped reduce barriers related to work, distance, transportation, and other daily responsibilities.

The study concludes that participation in ALS strengthened the learners' social and emotional experiences through peer collaboration and family support. Group discussions encouraged cooperation and confidence, while family involvement provided academic assistance and strengthened relationships.

The study concludes that ALS contributed to the participants' renewed self-confidence, sense of accomplishment, resilience, and aspirations for a better future. Despite financial and material challenges, the learners viewed ALS as a pathway toward further education, vocational training, livelihood development, and improved employment opportunities.

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