

The Lived Experiences of Alternative Learning System Teachers in English Literacy Instruction

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Abstract. This study explores the challenges that Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers face in English literacy instruction and the coping strategies they employ to overcome these hurdles. Given the crucial role of English literacy, this study aims to delve into the lived experiences of ALS teachers, who are pivotal in the knowledge transfer process. Employing a phenomenological approach within qualitative research, the study draws on in-depth, in-person interviews with five ALS teachers to gather rich, experiential data. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts reveals that ALS teachers' roles encompass physical demands, mental fortitude, emotional investment, and social engagement. The themes that emerge as challenges in teaching the Communication Skills strand in English include high demands on teachers' resilience, diversity of students, limited instructional materials, limited instructional time, and negative public perception of teachers' roles and the program. Despite these challenges, ALS teachers develop coping strategies, including cultivating resilience to manage the demands of teaching the strand and maintaining a positive outlook. This study concludes that while ALS teachers face significant obstacles in managing the learning strand, their effective use of specific coping strategies ensures that each learner receives appropriately leveled instruction. Based on the findings, the researcher proposes a training program that can improve ALS teachers' pedagogical approaches to enhance further their capabilities in making a difference in the field of education through ALS and, most importantly, in the lives of their learners.

Keywords: ALS teachers; English literacy instruction; Challenges in teaching; Coping strategies; Diverse learners; Teaching resilience.

1.0 Introduction

English literacy is considered an essential skill in today's globalized world. Proficiency in English enables individuals to communicate effectively, access information, and participate in a globalized workforce (Bawa, 2020; Eslit & Valderrama, 2023; Heryono & Gunawan, 2019), thus opening doors to various opportunities, including employment, higher education, and social mobility (Armea et al., 2022; Bachore, 2022). Literacy in English encompasses proficiency in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and comprehending the English language (Spies, 2023), making English an essential language in education (Ali, 2022). Mastery of the fundamental English language skills is crucial for learners to communicate effectively. Developing these skills fosters personal growth among students and empowers them to communicate proficiently and thrive in diverse settings and circumstances (Dimaano & Hường, 2019). This makes language literacy, including English literacy, a critical competency in the Philippine education system (Bastida et al., 2022).

English also holds the status of an official language in the country and serves as the official language of the Philippines for communication and instruction, alongside the Filipino language (Department of Education [DepEd], 1987; Oducado et al., 2020). English has emerged as the predominant language of communication in different fields, such as education, mass media, and the sciences. Its continued prevalence grants English a socially advantageous position, equipping Filipinos with the ability to actively engage in a competitive global marketplace (Manalastas, 2022). However, while a significant portion of the Filipino population possesses a level of English proficiency, there has been a concerning decline in this regard, as evidenced by the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) over the past several years (Santos et al., 2022). EF EPI is a global ranking of countries based on the English language skills of their adult populations. It is an essential benchmark for assessing English language proficiency among adults.

In 2020, the Philippines' ranking in the EF EPI dropped from 20th to 27th. This decline is part of a broader trend of worsening English proficiency in the country, as evidenced by the EF EPI data. From 13th place in 2016, the Philippines slipped to 15th place in 2017, 14th place in 2018, and finally to 20th place in 2019 (Baclig, 2020). The Philippines experienced a four-notch decline in the 2022 edition of EF EPI, placing it 22nd out of 111 countries. Despite this drop, the Philippines remained the second highest-ranked country in English proficiency within East and Southeast Asia (Philippine Institute of Development Studies, 2023). This year, the country demonstrated a high level of English proficiency, ranking 20th out of 113 countries and second among 23 Asian nations (Parungao, 2023). The country has not yet reached a Very High English proficiency score in the assessment.

The Philippines' performance in two recent international literacy assessments for students has also been concerning. In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018, 15-year-old Filipino students who participated ranked last among 79 countries, scoring 140 points below the 487 OECD average points. Specifically, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) reported that the average reading score in the Philippines was 340 points, comparable to the Dominican Republic score. Both countries had the lowest scores among all participating countries. In the Philippines, more than 80% of students did not achieve the minimum level of proficiency in reading, indicating a significant proportion of low performers compared to other PISA-participating countries and economies. Similarly, in SEA-PLM 2019, the Philippines ranked fifth among six Southeast Asian countries. These findings indicate that many Filipino students struggle with reading comprehension (DepEd, 2019; Espinosa et al., 2023).

In the context of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program, specifically regarding ALS students' English language performance, Maramag (2022) conducted a study that revealed that ALS learners face challenges in developing their oral reading skills, evident in their reading difficulties and behaviors. Their word recognition skills are underdeveloped, as demonstrated by their frequent mispronunciation of words. A separate study by Tambis et al. (2023) evaluated the reading comprehension skills of grade 11 ALS students and revealed that mispronunciation was the most prevalent miscue among them. The researchers also concluded that the study participants had difficulty comprehending and responding to the reading comprehension test. They employed the Department of Education's Philippine-Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) Manual Tool as the primary instrument to assess reading comprehension skills, focusing on both word reading level and comprehension level. This is a matter of concern, as comprehension is the essence of reading, and without it, reading loses its meaning (Labarrete, 2019a).

Additionally, Labarrete (2019b) revealed that while learners demonstrate proficiency in composing in their native language, Waray, they encounter significant challenges when attempting to produce similar compositions in English. The researcher added that content organization, vocabulary, and mechanics pose the most significant teaching challenges for the ALS-A&E Writing curriculum implementers. In contrast, vocabulary, content, and mechanics present the most significant learning hurdles for the clientele. Furthermore, Lucero and Ibojo (2023) investigated the English writing tasks of ALS graduate students enrolled in the Senior High School at Bunawan National High School. They revealed that these students faced challenges in organizing their ideas, using punctuation marks correctly, developing comprehensive content, and employing a diverse vocabulary.

In terms of ALS students' oral communication, Cagoco (2021) found that students grapple with communication and idea expression, evident in their stuttering when speaking English, struggles to articulate ideas due to limited

grammar knowledge and communication skills, and fear of making mistakes while speaking English. Moreover, in the brief written by Osawa (2021) for UNICEF Philippines, it was found that certain ALS students found sessions challenging and expressed difficulty in comprehending the explanations provided by mobile teachers when English was used as the medium of instruction. According to Moleño (2019), in his study titled *Influencing Variables to the Competencies of Learners in the Accreditation and Equivalency Test of Alternative Learning System*, it is reported that the weighted average mean in the competency in essay writing among ALS learners was 2.88. This score straddles the boundary between “adequate response” and “less than adequate response,” indicating that while some learners display sufficient skills, a notable number fall short. The minimum passing score for this section is set at 3, underscoring the need for improvement to meet the requisite standard for passing.

For this reason, the importance of achieving English literacy is placed in formal education and non-formal education programs, such as the ALS program. The program is an essential initiative by DepEd to facilitate access to education for individuals who have not completed formal schooling, including out-of-school youth and adult learners (Defacto, 2022). Therefore, equipping learners of ALS with English literacy skills is essential in empowering them to become active participants in society. As English is the most widely used and firmly established global language in many fields, including those in which future graduates are likely to find themselves working (Rao, 2019), not only DepEd places utmost importance on English literacy skills mastery but also students themselves. Given the significant attention placed by the Philippine education system on achieving competencies in English literacy and students’ realization of the impact of the language in their lives, it is crucial to consider the role that teachers play in the learning and teaching process relevant to English language mastery through education.

A study on ALS teachers’ lived experiences in English literacy instruction is relevant. Such a study can provide valuable insights into how English literacy learning is achieved in inclusive education through ALS. By exploring the lived experiences of ALS teachers within this context, the study can shed light on the challenges, coping strategies, and effective practices teachers employ to facilitate English literacy learning among diverse learners. This includes delving into ALS teachers’ instructional approaches, pedagogical techniques, and classroom management strategies. The study has the potential to identify specific areas within English literacy instruction where teachers require additional support. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by ALS teachers, as well as their coping strategies and support needs in effectively instructing students with diverse abilities, backgrounds, and learning styles to enhance their English communication skills, we can develop programs that further foster teachers’ motivation and dedication to their profession.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative research approach is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of Alternative Learning System teachers in English literacy instruction, highlighting the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ to address them. In qualitative research, the researcher, looking at the lens through the participants’ inputs, focuses more on experience, meaning, and perspective (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Qualitative research holds significant value in educational research as it delves into the “how” and “why” of research inquiries, facilitating a profound comprehension of experiences, phenomena, and contexts. This approach permits the exploration of questions that cannot be readily quantified, providing insights into the intricacies of human experiences (Cleland, 2017).

Specifically, the phenomenological research design is used for this study. This approach aims to uncover the essence and meaning of a particular phenomenon as it is experienced by those involved (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The phenomenological approach originated from Edmond Husserl’s belief that the self-experience of phenomena is the foundation for knowledge. This approach aims to comprehend how individuals construct reality and is employed by researchers to explore the meaning, composition, and essence of lived experiences. Through investigating the conscious experiences of individuals, researchers seek to distill and uncover the core aspects of these experiences (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

2.2 Research Locale

This study was conducted in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, specifically within DepEd's Division of Bacolod City. The study focused on Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in community learning centers and schools within the said division. The division offers a Basic Literacy Program (BLP), Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) for both Elementary and Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS). JHS is purely ALS, while the formal school manages SHS as per the Education Program Specialist for ALS.

2.3 Research Participants

The participants in this study were selected based on specific inclusion criteria. Teachers must be employed under the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program. Participants must currently hold assignments within DepEd - Division of Bacolod City. Additionally, participants must possess a minimum of one year of teaching experience. Lastly, they must have taught English literacy for at least one year, specifically through the Communication Skills in English strand.

Consequently, teachers who did not meet these criteria, including ALS teachers who have not taught Learning Strand I or those with less than one year of teaching experience, were excluded from participation in this study. By implementing these criteria, the study focused on the perspectives and experiences of ALS teachers with a substantial background in teaching English. The researcher initially targeted to include 8 participants, but ultimately, only 6 ALS teachers accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Out of the 6 participants, only 5 met the inclusion criteria.

Given the study's specific focus on the challenges and coping strategies in English literacy instruction through the Communication Skills in English strand, a smaller sample size still provides valuable insights, as the ALS teachers' sharing is focused on only one subject area. The straightforward nature of the topic and the rich, experiential data gathered from interviews support the sufficiency of participants. This approach aligns with qualitative research standards, emphasizing the depth and richness of data over mere quantity. This aligns with Morse's (2000) discussion on determining sample size in qualitative research, where the author highlighted what factors should be considered when deciding the number of participants.

2.4 Research Instrument

This study's primary data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview questionnaire, which guided the interviews conducted with the participants. Prior to data collection, the interview questions underwent a validation process by three experts in the field of English teaching. These experts rated the instrument on a scale of 1 to 5, where five indicated "Very High," or the instrument meets a very high extent, and one indicated "Not At All," or the instrument does not meet the criteria. The experts provided feedback and suggestions on the questions to ensure they met these criteria: clarity, appropriateness of language, alignment with the target construct, comprehensiveness of content, and ease of use. Individual interview schedules were arranged upon confirmation of their participation, accommodating the participants' availability and preferred location.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher formally requested permission to conduct a study on the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in English literacy instruction through a letter addressed to the Division of Bacolod City Schools Division Superintendent. The Senior Education Program Specialist for Planning and Research signed the letter before being endorsed to the Schools Division Superintendent. Additionally, permission was also secured from the Chief Education Supervisor through the Public Schools District Supervisor and the Division ALS Focal Person. The Education Program Specialist for ALS provided a list of possible participants. The researcher reached out to them via text messaging and phone calls.

Informed consent was obtained from each participant who accepted the invitation, emphasizing their rights to confidentiality. This was highlighted before and at the beginning of the interviews. The participants were also briefed on the study's nature and purpose. Additionally, the researcher provided the participants with an interview guide containing questions prepared before the interview. The interviews were conducted in a suitable setting to ensure the participants' comfort, ease, and privacy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ALS teachers to gather data on their lived experiences in English literacy instruction. The interviews were audio-

recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accurate data collection. The researcher additionally documented observations during the interview process.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained individual consent from each participant to confirm their voluntary participation. Informed consent forms were provided and signed by the interviewees before the interviews. Measures were implemented to uphold participants' rights concerning anonymity, confidentiality, and feedback on the study's results. No names were recorded on the interview questionnaires, and pseudonyms (T1 to T5, representing all teacher participants) were assigned to each interviewee. The researcher assured the interviewees, Education Program Specialists, and the DepEd Division of Bacolod City that their information would remain safeguarded and protected even after the completion of the study. Lastly, the researcher conducted a debriefing process after each interview, during which the researcher expressed gratitude and acknowledged the significance of each participant's expertise and contributions to the research.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences

Four distinct themes emerged from the research data on experiences: physical, mental, emotional, and social. Each aspect generated one theme.

Theme 1: Balancing Act: The Physical Demands of ALS Teaching

A balancing act between strain and stamina characterizes the physical side of educators' experiences. It often takes center stage in the rigorous environment of teaching the Alternative Learning System (ALS). ALS teachers cross a difficult ground that puts their stamina and resilience to the test as they work with underprivileged students and facilitate education in various situations. They bear physical obligations that go well beyond the walls of conventional classrooms, from the persistent demands of travel to the strain of hauling large loads. This subject explores the challenges experienced by ALS teachers, showing the incredible tenacity and endurance that allow them to continue in their admirable quest for educational excellence while bringing attention to the physical toll that stress, exhaustion, and the demands of their jobs have on their bodies. These selected responses from the participants shed light on the physical demands of teaching, highlighting the challenges that put teachers' stamina to the test.

"You travel a lot because you have a different CLC every day. As ALS teachers, we are required to work in three community learning centers. So, every day, where you teach varies, your learners vary, and the places vary. So, sometimes, you cannot attend to prior commitments for the family because you must put extra effort into your profession as an ALS teacher." (T5)

"I think you need to have good endurance. Because first, you are the one who is... You are going to areas or houses to invite learners and enroll them. So, first, you need to have physical endurance. Moreover, number two, in a way, is advantageous for me because when you have that kind of job, you are mobile all the time. I think it also adds up to your... your strength, your physical, ah, endurance." (T2)

In summary, the physical experiences of ALS English teachers have highlighted the arduous nature of their work and the enormous sacrifices they make to improve their students' education. Even though they undoubtedly confront obstacles, their tenacity and unshakable commitment come through, underscoring the significant influence of their efforts in advancing educational justice and empowering underrepresented populations. These findings are supported by a study that reported that ALS teachers face unique challenges compared to teachers in traditional classrooms. One such challenge is their constant mobility, which may require assistance adapting to a conventional classroom setting when initially hired. Moreover, they may be assigned to remote locations that are difficult to access, resulting in uncomfortable travel arrangements (Funtecha et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Empathy in Action: Nurturing Mental Resilience

The psychological side of teachers' experiences underscores the intricate balance they must maintain between their mental preparedness, emotional resilience, and dedication to their students' well-being. It is an active demonstration of cognitive empathy by Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers, who understand and respond empathetically to their learners' struggles. These selected responses from the participants paint a vivid

picture of the complex interplay between their profession's mental and emotional aspects. One teacher reflects on teachers' mental challenges and self-doubt regarding their effectiveness, particularly concerning exam results and students' success. This intertwines with their emotional investment in their students' outcomes.

"Would I be able to let all of them pass at the end of the year? Am I an effective teacher to them? Since we had an exam prior to the modular, I always had this fear for my students. What if only 25% of my 200 learners pass the exam? What will happen to the 75%?" (T1)

Another teacher highlights the resilience needed, emphasizing the importance of a positive outlook and recognizing students' motivations to manage the diverse challenges in ALS, showcasing a deep psychological understanding.

"Number one, you really must understand (sighs) the psyche of the learners. Most of them are not motivated. That is... that is the basis for the Alternative Learning System. When you want to become an ALS teacher, you must focus on their motivation." (T2)

ALS educators have a deep-seated fear of their students failing, a notable characteristic of the mental component. Teachers frequently struggle with this obligation because of their learners' backgrounds and learning styles. They worry that their efforts might not provide the results they are hoping for. This showcases the enormous pressure on ALS teachers as they influence their students' literacy development.

Theme 3: Building Bonds: Emotional Support for Learners

In the Alternative Learning System (ALS), teachers often navigate a complex emotional landscape as they work with students from diverse backgrounds, particularly financially challenged ones. Their emotional state is deeply intertwined with their commitment to educating and empowering these students, many of whom face significant barriers to academic success. ALS teachers are not just educators but also mentors, advocates, and sources of support for their students. These responses from the participants underscore the emotional bonds they form with their students and highlight their concern for their learners' well-being.

"I am worried, but I do not stop. I do not stop encouraging them. I do not stop giving them chances." (T1)

"I also get frustrated realizing my learners' needs because most of my learners in a particular barangay are poor. Sometimes, I provide for their needs. "Ma'am, I do not have money for the fare; Ma'am, I do not have food," so you, as a teacher, would feel for them. I get frustrated seeing them hungry. Sometimes, they are shy about sharing it, but you can see it yourself. You can see it in their faces and notice their pale faces. However, they still attend classes." (T5)

Teachers strive to maintain emotional balance and professionalism in their interactions with students. They understand the importance of setting boundaries between their emotional selves and professional roles. However, this distinction can be challenging to uphold, especially given the diverse and often vulnerable learners who enroll in the program. Despite efforts to maintain a professional demeanor, ALS teachers inevitably find themselves emotionally invested in the well-being and success of their students, given the unique challenges and backgrounds of those they serve.

This deep level of care is vividly illustrated by the participants in a study by Sumawang et al. (2024), highlighting teachers' proactive measures during challenging times. As detailed in the study, teachers adapted their teaching methods by providing modules to learners who missed lessons due to the disruptions caused by the pandemic and other factors. These modules were not just educational stopgaps but were delivered directly to students' homes, ensuring that educational engagement continued despite physical absences. Such actions demonstrate that mobile teachers maintain a solid commitment to the welfare of their learners, transcending barriers of age, sex, or family background, thereby supporting the notion that their emotional connection with students is deeply intertwined with their educational mission.

Theme 4: Fostering Inclusion: Community Social Engagement

This theme underscores the pivotal role of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in connecting various societal segments to enhance educational outcomes. ALS teachers are uniquely positioned to forge bonds beyond the conventional classroom as facilitators at the intersection of education and community engagement. This bridging is not merely a facilitative role but a transformative one, where educators act as liaisons between students and broader societal resources. By integrating community values and resources into their pedagogical strategies, teachers can create a more inclusive, supportive educational environment that mirrors the diverse realities of their students' lives. These responses from ALS teachers highlight the social aspects of teaching, emphasizing the importance of building connections and partnerships within the community.

"I want to reach out to TESDA. It is so hard to reach TESDA. I do not know all about that. Ah... Because of ALS, I thought of connecting to LGUs, government agencies, and private personnel. I even thought of reaching out to businessmen to find ways for my learners to have some materials we need in class – supplies, resources." (T3)

"You are training yourself to communicate with others. Like for example, barangay captains, government officials, stakeholders, your principal in school, and the parents. So, you develop strategies for approaching them easily." (T4)

Engaging with diverse stakeholders is pivotal, as evidenced by the sharing of the participants. These interactions between teachers and stakeholders enhance teachers' communication skills and serve a more strategic purpose. Teachers proactively contact various local entities—including government units, barangay officials, school authorities, and parents—to foster better relationships and secure essential support for the program. These efforts aim to improve the welfare of the primary beneficiaries of the ALS program: the students.

This is why, in the study conducted by Gochuico (2021), most Instructional Managers in the ALS programs in the City of Dasmariñas highlight the critical role of establishing external partnerships. These partnerships are essential because they enable acquiring resources, exchanging knowledge, and attaining accreditation, all fundamental elements for supporting and sustaining ALS programs.

3.2 Challenges

Five themes emerged from the research data on the challenges category, specifically relating to English literacy instruction or teaching the Communication Skills strand in English.

Theme 1: Fostering Resilience in Teaching

Teaching English literacy in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) setting presents unique challenges that test the resilience of teachers. For educators, resilience is not just about personal endurance but about sustaining the motivation and energy required to engage and inspire students, manage classroom dynamics, and adjust teaching strategies in response to diverse learning needs. In ALS, teachers face many daily challenges ranging from administrative pressures and resource limitations to diverse student needs and behavioral management. The capacity to remain committed and optimistic in the face of these challenges is crucial. It ensures teachers maintain a positive learning environment and effectively support their students' educational journeys.

One participant shared the struggle of teaching in a language that students may not fully comprehend. Despite using English as the medium of instruction, many students still require explanations in the vernacular, leading to a sense of frustration and stress for the teacher. This highlights the gap between the intended instruction and the student's understanding, emphasizing the need for creative strategies to bridge this divide and the urgency of finding innovative solutions.

"We have six strands, five strands in English. However, I need to translate it so they understand what I am discussing. I need to speak in Filipino. I am talking or speaking in English, and we use English as a communication medium inside the classroom. However, they cannot understand what I am discussing, especially when I give instructions. Then, somebody would send a private message to me asking, "Ma'am, what did you say? What was that, Ma'am?" They need clarification. They are asking for clarification. So, instead of using English, I use the vernacular so as not to waste time. It is stressful when you receive many messages from learners telling you they cannot understand. Even the simple ones." (T1)

Another teacher pointed out the importance of a conducive learning environment, emphasizing the impact of physical space on learning outcomes. The lack of permanent classrooms or designated learning areas can hinder students' focus and engagement, making it challenging to deliver English instruction effectively. This highlights the need for adequate resources and infrastructure to support effective teaching and learning in ALS.

"... with my experience, having a classroom or having a permanent area is... that would make learning conducive. And then... that may sound cliché, but that is the truth. Because, for example, we are making a portfolio, the outputs, for example, if you are in a gym or an open space, some of them cannot focus. So, I think the disadvantage would be that we do not have Community Learning Centers or classrooms." (T2)

Several teachers highlight a significant communication challenge due to language barriers. Many ALS learners struggle with the primary medium of instruction, English. This difficulty is not merely a function of vocabulary or grammar but extends to the basic ability to understand instructions and engage with the educational content. Teachers must shift from English to local languages or dialects like Filipino and Hiligaynon to make learning more accessible and ensure students grasp the curriculum effectively. This is the same approach that participants used in the study by Arca (2015). The participants integrated the use of the mother tongue as they taught ALS students, making the latter not feel discriminated against during the instruction. This linguistic adjustment, while necessary, introduces complexity into teaching and requires significant flexibility and understanding from educators.

Theme 2: Embracing Diversity in ALS Education

Diversity in the classroom encompasses a broad range of differences among students, including cultural, socio-economic, linguistic, cognitive, and learning abilities. This diversity fundamentally shapes the teaching and learning environment, compelling educators to adapt their teaching styles and content to accommodate various backgrounds and needs. Teachers must be adept at understanding these differences and skilled in crafting accessible lessons for all students. The presence of diversity can enrich the educational experience, providing students and teachers alike with broader perspectives and learning opportunities. However, it also poses challenges, such as the need for differentiated instruction and the potential for misunderstandings or disparities in educational outcomes. Handling diverse students in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) setting presents a multifaceted challenge for teachers in English literacy instruction, as shared by some teachers.

"So, in my experience, that is too difficult because even if they... you can consider it a homogenous grouping because all of them are in high school. However, ahm... in terms of their background, in terms of their prior knowledge, in terms of their training, I think that... that there is still lacking... there would always be a lacking part for them to... for a teacher to be able to have, like, the class for everyone. So, ahm, that is very challenging because, number one, you need to have differentiated materials. Number two, you need extra time with those who need to catch up." (T2)

"... our learners are from different levels. There are Grade 6 and Grade 3, and they are not on the same level, so it's multi-grade. So, for the level of this specific child, your approach should be different. It should be different for others, too. They are fast learners. They know more already. Some are behind." (T4)

Several pivotal themes emerge from the teachers' shared experiences when analyzing the challenges of handling diversity in ALS classrooms. These narratives illustrate the profound complexity and nuanced demands placed on ALS educators as they strive to address their learners' varying educational needs. Teachers face a significant challenge bridging the educational gaps among students from varied academic backgrounds, including differences in schooling levels and prior educational interruptions. These gaps manifest in basic literacy skills, with some students struggling with fundamental concepts such as sentence construction and vocabulary.

The same is true in the study findings of Arzadon and Nato (2015), which detailed the struggle of ALS teachers handling diverse learners. According to them, ALS teachers often face the significant challenge of teaching an incredibly diverse group ranging from young children to the elderly. Their classrooms consist of adults with minimal literacy, hardly able to read and write. This diversity necessitates distinct pedagogical approaches tailored to each student's unique educational needs. This scenario demands that teachers create a curriculum accessible to all and engage in continuous assessment and adjustment to align their teaching strategies with the individual learning trajectories of their students.

Theme 3: Navigating Instructional Material Scarcity

Instructional materials are indispensable resources in the educational landscape, pivoting in facilitating effective teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. In the Alternative Learning System (ALS), where learners often face diverse challenges and come from varied educational backgrounds, instructional materials and their effectiveness are paramount. Tailored materials cater to ALS students' unique needs and circumstances, providing avenues for accessible and equitable education.

However, lacking instructional materials can significantly impede English literacy instruction in ALS. Without adequate resources, educators may struggle to effectively engage students, convey complex language concepts, or provide meaningful learning experiences. This shortage can hinder the development of critical literacy skills among ALS learners, potentially limiting their academic progress and future opportunities. Thus, recognizing the significance of instructional materials in the ALS program underscores the necessity for accessible resources and equitable access to quality education to optimize English literacy instruction and enhance learning outcomes for all ALS students.

Teachers recurrently discussed the challenge of teaching English literacy in ALS with limited instructional materials. They underscored the need to supplement the provided modules with their materials, such as Learning Activity Sheets, to ensure that lessons are comprehensible to students. This highlights the importance of teacher creativity and resourcefulness in adapting materials to suit the needs of their students, especially in simplifying complex concepts and instructions for better comprehension.

"If you just based it on the module, it would be difficult for the learners. The instructions in the module are sometimes hard to understand, so you make it less difficult for the learners. You have to rephrase for the learners so they understand easily. Sometimes, the right phrasing can make something more understandable." (T1)

"... the modules are too fixed for a certain level only. Whereas, in the Internet, we can find leveled passages which, wherein I can adjust, I can give to the different learners." (T3)

"So, based on the modules given by the central office, for me, it is very hard for learners to understand. You need to facilitate and guide them. You should give extra examples." (T4)

Another teacher also shared that there is a lack of access to essential resources like Wi-Fi, projectors, and speakers in Community Learning Centers, which limits the teachers' ability to utilize online resources and multimedia tools for teaching. This underscores the importance of providing adequate resources to enhance the quality of education in ALS and facilitate more engaging and effective teaching methods.

"... however, one thing the is lacking is that our Community Learning Centers do not have Wi-Fi access. So, if you do not have an internet connection, you will not be able to enjoy everything. And then, at the same time, we do not have... not all our teachers have projectors, speakers, or television sets. So, if you go to a particular area, you must imagine, I have to bring a speaker, I have to bring my netbook, I have to bring a projector, just for me to show everything. So... but they are all available." (T2)

These narratives underscore apparent discrepancies between the resources provided and the actual needs of both teachers and learners. Pablo (2021) underscores this point by highlighting several studies that reveal a consistent shortage of critical facilities and instructional materials in the ALS program, such as classrooms, textbooks, and manuals. This evidence further supports the argument that resource constraints are a significant obstacle affecting the effectiveness of ALS education.

Theme 4: Managing Instructional Time Constraints

Adequate instructional time is fundamental to effective teaching and learning. It serves as a cornerstone for educators, imparting knowledge, facilitating understanding, and nurturing academic growth among students.

Within the Alternative Learning System (ALS), where learners often contend with diverse educational backgrounds and interrupted formal education, having enough instructional time is paramount. Particularly in English literacy instruction, where proficiency in language skills is crucial for academic and personal development, sufficient time allows ALS educators to comprehensively address learners' varied needs.

However, when instructional time is limited, as is often the case in non-traditional educational settings like ALS, the impact on instruction can be profound. With constrained timeframes, educators may struggle to cover essential content, provide adequate support, or engage students effectively, ultimately hindering the development of critical literacy skills and impeding academic progress. Thus, recognizing the significance of ample instructional time in both the ALS program and English literacy instruction underscores the necessity for equitable access to quality education and the importance of addressing time constraints to optimize learning outcomes. ALS teachers face significant challenges due to limited instructional time to teach English literacy effectively. Teachers shared that class hours must be extended to make up for missed lessons and ensure all necessary content is covered. Others shared the necessity of reducing the number of competencies covered in a given period to ensure depth of understanding. These highlight the pressure teachers feel to meet curriculum requirements despite time constraints.

"It is not enough. Sometimes, there is a need to extend my class. I need to ask my students to come on a Saturday so we can make up for the lessons missed. We have lessons that need to be taught." (T1)

"You cannot teach all competencies in English because there are a lot. So, we only teach competencies that are in the module. The rest of the modules are given as assignments since our time is limited, given that we only have class once a week. We teach in different places and CLCs daily, so you also handle different learners. The time given for English is limited." (T5)

Although the schedule offered under the ALS program allows flexibility to busy students to complete their education without having to attend daily classroom sessions, as the program also caters to working individuals by providing flexible learning options (Selec, 2023), the limited time available for English instruction, compounded by the diverse teaching environments and learner needs, creates a significant challenge for ALS teachers in effectively teaching English literacy. These challenges highlight the need for creative instructional strategies and a reevaluation of the curriculum to ensure that essential English competencies are effectively taught within the constraints of the ALS program.

The structure of the ALS program, which often involves teaching at different Community Learning Centers (CLCs) each day and managing different groups of learners, further complicates time management. With classes typically held once a week per group, the limited instructional time restricts what can be realistically achieved in each session, potentially hampering the educational progress of ALS learners who may require more consistent engagement to meet learning objectives.

Theme 5: Maintaining Professional Reputation

Negative professional reputation can significantly affect teachers, particularly those in the Alternative Learning System (ALS), where misconceptions about the rigor and value of their work are prevalent. For teachers, a diminished professional reputation can lead to challenges such as decreased morale, reduced support from the community, and diminished self-efficacy, all of which can hinder their ability to engage and motivate students effectively.

This is especially critical in teaching core subjects like English literacy, where ALS teachers face substantial obstacles such as varying levels of student preparedness and linguistic diversity. When ALS teachers are perceived negatively or not taken seriously, it can exacerbate these challenges, making it harder to secure necessary resources and support and potentially leading to lower student engagement and achievement in English literacy. Such perceptions can undermine the teacher's authority and the seriousness with which students approach learning, thereby impacting educational outcomes within this vital field.

The narratives shared reveal challenges related to the professional reputation of ALS teachers, illustrating a complex interplay between community perceptions, misunderstandings about the nature of ALS education, and

the personal commitments of ALS educators. One teacher noted the dual perception of ALS teachers, with some appreciating their efforts while others perceived them as lazy due to misconceptions about the program's structure and intensity.

"Those who do not understand ALS would always say that ALS teachers are... are lazy because they thought that in a week, I only have one class. However, those whose kids, whose relatives, whose... even whose parents have finished junior high school and their elementary with me as their teacher, ahm, they would always appreciate... in the community, of course, they know me as an ALS teacher. They would always say, "Wow, you have put so much effort into these individuals," So... Ahm, public perception is always (laughs), always varies, I think. However, those who do not know ALS would always say that... the job of an ALS teacher is very easy. However, they do not know everything happening in between (laughs)." (T2)

Others reflected on the low public perception of both ALS teachers and the program,

"Actually, for me, the public perception of ALS is so low, I think. So, they think that ALS is, in our terms, weak. So, for me, sometimes, my co-teachers from that school where I am assigned would say, "ALS is this and that." (T4)

"So, they do not know what ALS is. "What is ALS?" Sometimes, we ALS teachers get insulted because they think the barangay employs us. They would comment that we should not pay attention to our learners. "Don't mind it, it's just ALS. It's easy." They don't know that ALS is the most challenging." (T5)

These challenges underscore the need for greater awareness and appreciation for the ALS program and the dedication of its teachers, who often work against negative perceptions to provide quality education to marginalized learners. While some community members and parents express gratitude and recognition for teachers' efforts, especially when they see tangible benefits for students, others remain critical and unappreciative of the teachers' extensive efforts. In the study conducted by Pablo (2021), ALS teachers in Tanauan reported that both parents and barangay officials held negative views about ALS programs and projects, highlighting the issues and challenges they encountered. This duality adds an emotional layer to the professional challenges faced by ALS teachers, impacting their morale and how they perceive their effectiveness and value.

3.3 Coping Strategies

Two distinct themes emerged from the research data under the coping strategies category, specifically relating to English literacy instruction or the teaching of the Communication Skills strand.

Theme 1: Cultivating Resilience in English Literacy Teaching

Despite the challenges, including teaching diverse learners and coping with limited resources and time, Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers exhibit exceptional dedication. According to UNESCO (2023), these educators go above and beyond by traveling long distances, working overtime, and utilizing personal resources to provide tailored learning experiences that address their students' diverse interests and abilities. Building resilience is identified as pivotal for ALS instructors, empowering them to adapt their instructional approaches and materials to suit the diverse educational backgrounds and needs of their pupils. This adaptability ensures that each learner is equipped with the tools to succeed despite the hurdles, emphasizing the importance of personalized educational strategies in resource-scarce environments.

Parto and Yango (2023) found that ALS teachers possess a high adversity quotient, indicating their substantial capacity to transform challenges into opportunities, manage tough circumstances effectively, and maintain a belief that situations will ultimately resolve positively. This fortitude also helps maintain educational continuity, which is especially crucial in ALS settings where learners may have previously experienced interruptions in their formal education. Overall, resilience in ALS teachers promotes an educational setting that is adaptable, inclusive, and supportive, empowering both teachers and learners to overcome obstacles and achieve their educational goals. These are the resilience-building coping strategies that participants shared for handling diverse learners:

"Actually, for those advanced learners, there are fewer activities because I know they already know how to use the language or have the skill for that subject. I also give extra activities to those who are challenged." (T4)

"... you need to have different activities for them. It is a must to find out which areas they find most difficult. So, when we hold classes, using the same module for everyone, with challenged advanced students and learners, we exert more effort to the latter." (T5)

These responses highlight a common theme in handling the challenges of teaching diverse learners within the ALS program. Teachers employ different coping strategies that cater to learners at varying proficiency levels. Their experiences reflect a shared understanding and approach to instructional differentiation, a key aspect in building resilience as educators in a multifaceted learning environment.

These are the resilience-enhancing coping strategies participants shared for managing limited instructional materials:

"We add more inputs. I do my Learning Activity Sheets. It is better if the teacher does her activity sheets since she knows the status and level of her students. She knows the standards and her students' capacity." (T1)

"I use different sources from the Internet to get passages, to get sentences, sometimes, to get worksheets that I give to my learners..." (T3)

There are apparent similarities in how teachers handle the challenges of limited instructional materials in the ALS program. Each teacher describes different strategies for augmenting or customizing their teaching resources to meet the needs of their diverse learners. Their coping strategies highlight a shared experience of resource scarcity and demonstrate their resilience in overcoming these challenges to provide adequate education.

These are the resilience-enhancing coping strategies participants shared for managing limited instructional time:

"However, as an English major, I... I think I still have the upper hand in choosing the competencies. So, I would always go to the basics. I would not go deep in literature because we have little time with that." (T2)

"I make sure to finish English so that the rest of the module can be given as an assignment. This way, the following week, we have modules to discuss. We do not have to discuss much as they have already studied at home. At least, we can focus on English." (T5)

Teachers have developed specific coping strategies to handle the challenges of teaching English literacy with limited allotted time. Their experiences demonstrate a consistent approach to maximizing instructional time through homework and focused competencies. In summary, the shared experiences of ALS teachers in managing English literacy instruction with limited time showcase their resilience as educators. Their coping strategies ensure that essential learning objectives are met and demonstrate their innovative and committed approach to teaching, which is essential for overcoming the inherent challenges of limited instructional time.

Theme 2: Fostering a Positive Outlook

A positive outlook is indispensable for teachers to shape their teaching approach and overall disposition. This optimism helps teachers manage the daily challenges and stresses inherent in the profession and enhances their ability to create a supportive and encouraging learning environment. When teachers maintain a hopeful and positive demeanor, they are more likely to engage students effectively, foster a sense of possibility within the classroom, and drive motivational and positive behavioral outcomes among their students.

A positive outlook becomes even more crucial in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) context, where educators frequently deal with students from diverse and often challenging backgrounds. ALS teachers face unique demands, including addressing interruptions in formal education and catering to various ages and learning levels. A positive mindset empowers teachers to see beyond these challenges to the potential in each student, encouraging persistence, resilience, and flexibility in their teaching methods.

Consequently, for ALS educators, maintaining a positive outlook is not just about personal resilience; it significantly influences their teaching efficacy and the program's overall success. By embodying optimism, ALS

teachers can better inspire hope and determination in their students, which is crucial for motivating learners who may have previously disengaged from traditional educational systems. This positivity, therefore, is vital in transforming the educational landscape for ALS students, fostering an environment where learning is seen as both achievable and transformative.

Examining coping strategies among ALS teachers reveals that maintaining a positive outlook is vital to their professional resilience and effectiveness. These educators collectively rely on positivity as a strategic response to their emotional and pedagogical challenges. This thematic consistency across their narratives underscores that fostering a positive outlook is more than a personal preference – it is an essential strategy for enhancing teaching efficacy and emotional well-being in the demanding environment of ALS education.

“... it has to do with you as a person. Ah, personally, I really... at my age... I do not listen to negative things that other people say. Especially if I know I am doing the right thing (laughs). It doesn't, it does not bother me.” (T2)

“It drives me more because they have this negative impression of ALS - the learners and the teachers. I do not know what is with them; maybe they just do not understand the program.” (T3)

One teacher's approach to ignoring negative comments reflects a strong sense of self-efficacy and personal security, suggesting that confidence in one's professional actions can shield against the demoralizing effects of external negativity. Additionally, the motivational drive that arises from overcoming societal misunderstandings and underestimations of the ALS program shows how negative perceptions can be transformed into a constructive force, reinforcing commitment and proving the program's value.

In their study to evaluate the implementation landscape of the ALS Program in Dapitan City, Philippines, Abad and Galleto (2020) emphasized the critical need for teachers to cultivate a positive attitude, engage in best practices, and stay informed about global trends to guide their students effectively. They argued that these improvements in teacher quality are essential for elevating educational standards overall. These insights indicate that promoting a positive outlook should be a strategic focus in ALS teacher training and support programs to enhance teacher retention and student outcomes. Recognizing and cultivating such coping strategies within the ALS teaching community can lead to more robust educational practices equipped to thrive amid the challenges of diverse and resource-limited settings. This approach supports teachers and fosters a supportive learning environment that prioritizes growth and improvement over criticism and embarrassment.

4.0 Conclusion

The experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers paint a vivid picture of dedication amidst challenges. Their roles encompass physical demands, mental fortitude, emotional investment, and social engagement. They tackle various learning strands and prioritize English communication skills, a crucial element for their students. Addressing the themes for challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy adjustments, professional development, and community engagement to support ALS teachers. By focusing on these areas, stakeholders can significantly improve the effectiveness of ALS education, thus contributing positively to the broader goal of eradicating illiteracy and enhancing educational opportunities for all population segments. This endeavor uplifts individuals and strengthens societal structures, making pursuing comprehensive and inclusive education reforms a necessary and noble cause.

ALS teachers demonstrate remarkable coping mechanisms. They build resilience through differentiated instruction and materials, contextualize learning experiences, and invest in personal finances. Their prioritization of core competencies and creative use of assignments ensure continuous learning. Additionally, they maintain a positive outlook, educating others about the program and celebrating student achievements. The research has highlighted significant challenges and inconsistencies in English literacy instruction under the ALS program, which point to the pressing need for targeted interventions. In response, continuous training is proposed for ALS teachers to strategically address these issues by enhancing pedagogical skills specifically tailored to the context of teaching English literacy within the ALS framework. This initiative is expected to improve the instructional capabilities of ALS educators and better cater to their students' diverse educational needs.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The contributions of each author are as follows: Jonathan P. Francisco, LPT, MAEd, conceptualized and designed the study, conducted data gathering, and analyzed and interpreted the data. Crisanta C. Buri, EdD, assisted with the study's conceptualization and data interpretation and guided throughout the research process.

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