

Understanding Learners' Decisions on the Alternative Learning System

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Abstract. This qualitative case study examined learners' choices in the South I District of Iligan City for enrolling in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination Program. The study evaluated the barriers and determinants that influenced these choices. Three aims structured the study. The first aim focused on the efficient functioning of the program, incorporating strategies such as the use of technology, learner-developed approaches, peer learning, and continuous monitoring; the outcomes valued inclusiveness, community participation, flexibility, and adequate support. The second aim identified key participation barriers, namely personal commitments, financial demands, perceived unreadiness, and inadequate support. Family obligations, community responsibilities, work demands, and limited state support were among the contributing barriers. The third aim addressed exam preparation challenges and the development of coping strategies. Learners faced emotional and psychological barriers as well as time management challenges, but utilized coping strategies to balance responsibilities, access emotional support, and address academic difficulties. The study concludes that a complex combination of socio-economic factors, systems of support, and individual resilience drives participation in the ALS A&E program. Strengthening these elements can improve accessibility and learner success.

Keywords: Accreditation and equivalency examination; Alternative Learning System; Barriers; Motivations; Participation.

1.0 Introduction

Education is a human right that opens doors and fosters community development. However, numerous students in the Philippines are burdened by socio-economic and personal factors that hinder their ability to attain formal education. The Alternative Learning System (ALS), established under Republic Act No. 11510 (Alternative Learning System Act), provides a convenient and adaptable path for out-of-school youth and adults. It was designed to cater to diverse learning needs and promote lifelong learning. Despite its vital role, enrollment in the ALS Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination—a requirement for academic certification and career opportunities—remains rare, particularly in regions such as Region X, where the dropout rate is 6% (Department of Education, 2023).

Financial difficulties, household tasks, and poor institutional support are persistent concerns in alternative education programs (Albert, Mendoza, Cabalbin, Mahmoud, and Muñoz, 2024). Although these studies categorize general barriers among out-of-school youth, they do not fully describe the unique experiences of ALS learners,

especially regarding their decisions to take or not take the A&E exam. Recent research by Garcia et al. (2023) and Mendoza et al. (2024) suggests that local programmatic and socioeconomic conditions influence learner motivation and barriers, particularly in specific communities, such as the South I District in Iligan City. On the other hand, government programs such as DepEd Memorandum No. 063, s. In 2024, the aim is to improve ALS program implementation and evaluation; however, empirical studies on practical, learner-centered implementation approaches are scarce.

Addressing these gaps, the study examines the interface between socio-economic concerns, program delivery, and coping strategies of learners to understand better the choices of ALS learners regarding the A&E Examination in South I District, Iligan City. Based on the author's own experience as an ALS teacher, the study aims to deepen the understanding of these factors to inform policy and practice. Ultimately, it seeks to offer practical recommendations on how to enhance program accessibility, establish support systems, and promote educational inclusion and attainment within the ALS system.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative case study approach to thoroughly investigate the impact of restoring the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination program on the Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners' decision to continue learning. A qualitative case study was employed as it enables an in-depth examination of students' lived realities in their natural learning environments, accepting the multifaceted dynamics of challenges, motivation, and socio-economic status. This aligns with existing research that highlights the significance of contextual understanding in alternative education (Carter, Hassan, Porterfield, & Barwich, 2024).

The use of this design is due to its potential to provide rich qualitative descriptions of student engagement and support structures. It also enables the examination of how adaptive learning opportunities and community positions influence student persistence (Garcia, 2021). The qualitative case study design is also well-suited for examining professional development and pedagogy that ALS facilitators may employ (Casingal, 2025), as well as technology integration as a factor influencing learning.

Based on a single setting, this research method enables a thorough examination of the effects of individual and systemic factors on the learning experience of ALS learners, aligning with previous studies of ALS (Nonong, 2022). This method is therefore best suited to respond to the research inquiry about the effects of the A&E program's relaunch on learner decision-making because it captures both the unique learner experiences and the more generic learning processes involved (Patel, 2022).

2.2 Research Locale

The South I District of Iligan City is an appropriate context for conducting this research due to its unique learning environment and the various challenges faced by learners in the Accreditation and Equivalency Examination Program. This program aims to provide educational opportunities for those who have not completed formal schooling, addressing various socio-economic factors that impact learning. By focusing on the South I District, the study can gain a better understanding of how local conditions influence educational outcomes and the effectiveness of the program. The district encompasses both urban and rural areas, and the resultant mixture of socio-economic environments affects access to and participation in learning. The study will be conducted within this district in order to effectively explore the specific barriers and motivations that influence students' inclination towards involvement in the Alternative Learning System (ALS).

2.3 Research Participants

The research included a sample of junior high school students enrolled in the Learners' Information System for the 2024-2025 school year. Eleven purposively chosen participants consisted of five students who participated in the A&E Examination, five students who did not participate, and one ALS division focal person. The sampling method was purposive, and selection was performed iteratively until theoretical saturation was reached, where no new themes or significant insights emerged from additional interviews, thereby ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the determinants impacting learners' choices. Inclusion criteria were junior high school students who were actively registered for the indicated school year. Students with basic literacy and those at the elementary

level were excluded to maintain a clear focus on the target population.

2.4 Research Instrument

The current research employed two primary research tools: a document review instrument and semi-structured interview protocols. The document review instrument was used to carefully scrutinize salient policy and procedural papers relevant to the ALS A&E Examination, such as Division Memorandum No. 002, dated the [insert date]. 2025; Regional Memorandum No. 072, s. 2025; the Alternative Learning System Advisory Guide: Taking the A&E Test; the 2024 Accreditation and Equivalency Test Registration and Administration Policy; and the ALS A&E Test Taker's Enhancement Review (Department of Education, 2024). These guides offered the contextual and regulatory frameworks from which the study drew.

Semi-structured interview guides prepared by the researcher included open-ended questions with literature modifications aimed at detecting learners' motivations and challenges regarding the A&E Examination. The questions were diligently cross-checked against the documents reviewed to ensure content relevance and comprehensive coverage of central issues. Validity was maintained through professional review by education experts familiar with ALS policies and testing procedures, ensuring alignment with the study's goals and official guidelines. Reliability was enhanced through pilot testing of the interview guide on a representative sample of ALS learners, which refined the clarity and flow of questions before complete data collection. This hybrid approach, combining document analysis with piloted and validated interviews, ensured a rigorous, contextualized, and grounded analysis of the factors driving learner participation in the A&E Examination.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered face-to-face from April 21 to 25, 2025. Participants were interviewed in their preferred languages using a researcher-developed interview guide crafted explicitly for the research. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with translations into English provided as needed. The guide was pilot-tested for reliability and ease of use, and content validity was assured through expert review. A professional transcriptionist guaranteed the accuracy of transcripts to maintain data quality. Additionally, document review supplemented the interview data by clarifying program procedures and official policy, further establishing the validity and triangulation of the findings.

The qualitative data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis process: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, significance determination, and reporting. The QDA Miner Lite software was used to facilitate systematic coding, data management, and retrieval, promoting rigor and transparency in the analysis process. Validity, reliability, and trustworthiness were ensured by tabulating emergent themes for clarity and having them reviewed by peers and the research advisor, which allowed for credibility and consistency in the findings.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The safety of participants was safeguarded by obtaining informed consent after a comprehensive explanation of the study's intent and participants' roles. Confidentiality was maintained at all times throughout the study period, and all data were stored securely by systematically handling them using QDA Miner Lite software to facilitate proper management. Participants were thoroughly briefed on their right to withdraw from the study at any time without incurring any penalties. These ethical standards, combined with peer and adviser reviews of the evolving themes, ensured the study's credibility and consistency.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents findings in line with the research aims, incorporating a thematic analysis. Each theme includes a brief interpretation and connection to existing literature. Figures provide concise statements for thematic analysis.

3.1 Delivery of the ALS Program

Description of ALS Program Delivery

The ALS program itself is an excellent model of an adaptive, student-centered program that greatly values inclusivity and access, offering equal opportunities for learning regardless of background or situation. The

program adapts to diverse learning styles, addressing various needs, and utilizes technological interventions to promote further access and diversify the learning process.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes on ALS Program Delivery

Theme	Subthemes	Description
Inclusivity and Accessibility	Flexible Learning Approaches, Diverse Learner Needs	Learner-focused approaches that make space for various schedules and backgrounds to maximize equitable access.
Community Involvement	Community-Based Learning, Peer Support	Participation in local learning and peer activity that enhances motivation and meaningfulness.
Adaptability & Improvement	Responsiveness to Challenges, Continuous Improvement	Program individualized support and feedback-informed tuning to meet learner needs.
Support & Resources	Study Materials and Counseling, Family and Educator Support	Supply of resources and instructions to gain confidence and preparedness for examinations.

As the ALS Division Focal Person continually pointed out, the “2024 Policy Guidelines on Accreditation and Equivalency Test Registration and Administration,” to which Regional Memorandum No. 072, s. 2025 serves as a guide and is applicable in our planning. The Bureau of Education Assessment will administer the ALS A&E Test on January 26, 2025, and February 2, 2025. Such policy guidelines ensure that our curriculum aligns with national standards and fosters the efficient preparation of learners. Technology-facilitated solutions are used to enhance access and provide personal learning experiences.

This alignment with national standards and flexible delivery establishes a motivating learning environment in which students feel empowered and valued. Community involvement is crucial to the success of the ALS program, as it integrates education into real-life situations and fosters learner motivation. Project-based learning and peer mentoring are two strategies that have effectively prepared learners for the A&E tests. The ALS Division Focal Person added, “Project work and peer-to-peer tutoring, among other existing teaching strategies, have worked to prepare students for the A&E exams. Student feedback has indicated increased confidence and participation, highlighting the role of community engagement in learning. Regular workshops and information sessions contribute to fostering community building.”

Students themselves reported, “*Learning with peers in my community inspires me. We exchange experiences and motivate one another.*” These collaborative projects bridge gaps between learners and learning materials, fostering involvement and achievement. The program's flexibility and continuous enhancement respond to learners' challenges, particularly socio-economic constraints and variations in readiness. Though the ALS test is exempt from an examination fee, learners face other socio-economic barriers, such as transportation and household responsibilities, that deter involvement. The ALS Division Focal Person explained, “*Among the key problems has been inconsistent learner preparedness and motivation, compounded by socio-economic barriers to access. These have led us to modify modes of delivery to introduce greater individualized support and adaptive timetabling. The memorandum emphasizes the importance of close surveillance in review classes to address these issues effectively. Continuous feedback from learners, as well as planned review sessions, guides ongoing innovations.*”

This responsiveness and individualized support are crucial for learner motivation and achievement. Support and services are prioritized to equip learners with the proper tools for success. The provision of study materials, counseling, and capacity-building training workshops empowers learners to approach the A&E examinations with confidence. The ALS Division Focal Person noted, “*We try to give students exposure to appropriate learning resources, such as learning materials and advisory services. The Division Memorandum requires ALS teachers to present proof of review sessions, establishing resource availability, and student guidance services for A&E exam writers. Test-taking competencies and strategies are strengthened during review sessions, contributing to overall instructional effectiveness. Such responsiveness and individualized assistance are gateways to learner motivation and success.*”

They valued, “*Having study guides and counseling prepared me and made me less anxious for the test.*” Despite the absence of exam costs, socio-economic and family obligations continue to be significant obstacles. Students mentioned difficulties, such as “*I need to look after my younger brothers, so I do not have sufficient time to prepare for the exam,*” and “*I did not have the specific date of the exam because the details were not certain; I missed the deadline.*” All of these concerns underscore the importance of better communication, flexible scheduling, and ongoing motivational encouragement. One student commented, “*If there were financial assistance and reminders, I think more students would*

take the exam.”

This financial support would likely assist with indirect costs such as travel or supplies used in learning, rather than exam charges. In the future, the ALS program envisions further integration of technology-based solutions to continue enhancing accessibility and tailoring learning to individual requirements. Continuing learner feedback will remain at the forefront of informing these enhancements, enabling responsiveness to shifting challenges and opportunities.

In summary, the advantages of the ALS program include its student-centered design, community engagement, responsive approaches, and integrated support systems. Its alignment with national standards and ongoing improvement orientation is likely to facilitate equitable learning and enable learners to succeed.

3.2 Barriers to Exam Participation among ALS Students

Challenges Preventing ALS Students from Taking the Exam

The results show that socioeconomic issues play a significant role in the lack of access to the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) examination for ALS students. Although the examination is free, indirect expenses such as travel and childcare prove to be a significant hindrance.

Table 2. Themes on Barriers to Exam Participation

Theme	Description
Socio-Economic Challenges	Financial constraints and competing family priorities hinder exam participation.
Family Responsibilities	Caregiving and household duties limit available time for study and exam attendance.
Need for Improved Communication	Inconsistent awareness of exam details leads to confusion and missed opportunities.
Importance of Support	Desire for financial aid, flexible schedules, and motivational follow-up to overcome barriers.

Most students do not want to study, and this is often preferable to studying, leading to frustration and hopelessness. For instance, Participant DNT1 informed us, *“I decided to work. I sold flowers to support my family because I am already married,”* highlighting how economic obligations often supersede exam preparation. Participant DNT2 echoed this, citing, *“The main challenges that prevented me from joining the exam were time and financial difficulties.”*

Similarly, Participant DNT3 pointed out the need for assistance with logistics: *“It would help to have enough money and pay someone to take care of my children.”* These responses underscore a broader socio-economic barrier to education access and concur with Anderson (2021), who reports that adult learners value economic survival over education.

Domestic work and responsibilities at home also emerge as significant limiting factors when it comes to taking exams. Students are often burdened with family caregiving and household tasks, which consume their study time and energy. Participant DNT3 explained, *“My wife just gave birth. Time and schedule were also a challenge because it was hard for me to leave her after giving birth.”* Participant DNT4 added, *“I had to take care of my family's welfare and my health,”* while Participant DNT5 stated, *“It was a personal choice on my part not to take it because of my children.”*

These findings illustrate how family requirements create complex dynamics that programs must address, validating research (Concepcion, Niez, Sabonsolin, Cabas, Calles, Magno, and Concepcion, 2024) regarding how caregiving responsibilities exacerbate learner stress and program withdrawal. Some of the main barriers identified include the need for improved test schedules and more effective communication protocols. While some participants, like DNT1, were well aware of the schedule *“Yes, I was aware of the schedule and procedure of the A&E Examination,”* others, like DNT5, were not *“No, I was not aware of the schedule and procedure because I had already stopped attending ALS classes at that time.”*

This distortion is attributed to information gaps in dissemination, which lead to disengagement and missed opportunities (Brown, Holyoke, Hunter-Johnson, & McNamara, 2022). Clear and consistent communication should be prioritized to minimize anxiety and maximize participation in educational programs (Nevins-Bennett & Martin, 2023).

The value of support systems—family, community, and education—is widely reported in learner testimonies. Learners indicated that they needed coordinated support to overcome barriers. Participant DNT2 stated,

“Financial support to pay someone to look after my child and for transport fare to go and write the exam,” and Participant DNT3 noted, *“More flexible timetables or revision classes that can accommodate my working arrangements.”* Participant DNT4 mentioned the motivational factor: *“What would make me sit the exam in the future is knowing that there is good guidance and support.”*

These findings by Johnson and Martinez (2022) suggest that resilience, with the support of the environment, is of paramount value to adult learner persistence. In the face of adversity, learners exhibit high levels of resilience and effective coping strategies. They actively seek emotional and instrumental support from others and kin and are sustained by their learning goals. This resilience is vital in coping with adversity and corresponds to previous research that highlights social and institutional support as central to learner success (Garcia, 2021).

In brief, socio-economic restrictions, familial duties, and communication deficiencies pose significant hindrances to attending ALS exams. Overcoming these challenges requires an integrated response incorporating logistics, emotional support, flexible program delivery, and improved communication strategies. The students' circumstances underscore the need for education programs that are tailored to their complex realities, providing an environment in which they can balance personal commitments with a willingness to pursue academic achievement.

3.3 Exam Challenges and Coping Strategies of ALS Learners

Challenges of Exam Participants and Coping Strategies

ALS students face a variety of interactive pressures as they juggle school needs with family and individual responsibilities. The Balancing Responsibilities theme emphasizes that students assume additional responsibilities outside of school and homework, demonstrating a high level of commitment despite limited time.

Table 3. Themes on Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Exam Takers

Theme	Description
Balancing Responsibilities	Learners manage work, family, and study through careful time allocation and prioritization.
Emotional and Social Support	Support from family, teachers, and employers sustains motivation and facilitates participation.
Coping with Academic Challenges	Learners proactively seek help and use resources to overcome difficulties with exam content.
Resilience in Adversity	Persistence despite discouragement highlights learners' determination and goal orientation.

Participant DT5 explained, *“I studied at lunchtime and nighttime so that it would not affect my work because it is our source of living.”* Similarly, Participant DT3 shared, *“I made sure I put the children to bed first before I started studying. I also helped my husband sell the flowers first before studying because that is our source of income and for family needs.”*

These accounts illustrate the constant negotiation that learners must engage in to find time to study amid other competing obligations, as well as the necessity of strong support for time management in the course (Matías-García, Cubero, Santamaría, and Bascón, 2024).

Emotional and social support is another crucial factor sustaining student motivation and persistence. Support from family, employers, and teachers provides instrumental assistance as well as encouragement. Participant DT5 valued their employer's support: *“Although I was working, my boss helped me. She brought me to the venue for review so that I could go.”* Printed copies were also available for us to read. Participant DT3 noted encouragement from both the teacher and family: *“Even though I was experiencing difficulties, I continued through encouragement from the teacher as well as my family to learn the reviewer so that I could sit for the exam.”*

Such supportive environments instill confidence in learners and enhance their resilience, highlighting the importance of a supportive social environment for learning achievement. While dealing with academic issues, students struggle with exam content and can become demotivated. Participant DT5 admitted, *“Sometimes I was not present, and I was getting frustrated because I was falling behind in class. That is why my teacher came to my workplace to tell me that I could still catch up.”* Others, like Participant DT3, also requested additional materials: *“I struggled during the review, especially with those questions that had blanks. I Googled to learn more, but at times even Google did not know because my questions were filtered through.”*

These examples demonstrate the adaptability and self-guided problem-solving of students, underscoring the significance of open-access support and resources available to overcome learning challenges.

The “Resilience in the Face of Adversity” theme showcases students' determination in the face of challenging circumstances. Participant DT5 reflected, *“Whenever there was trouble happening in my family, sometimes I thought school was too much. However, because of the advice from my teacher not to leave problems behind, I persisted.”* Participant DT2 mentioned a strong motivator: *“But then I realized that if I do not persist, I will not get a diploma or certification, which I need to find employment. So, I persisted.”* This persistence illustrates how students transform challenges into encouragement, enabling them to persevere despite their circumstances.

These findings align closely with existing literature. Economic constraints and family responsibilities have consistently been identified as major obstacles in adult education (Espejon, Santos, & Reyes, 2024). The struggle to balance caregiving duties with study time often leads to stress and feelings of inadequacy, which can discourage program completion. Financial barriers—including costs related to transportation and study materials—also impede participation, echoing Lopez, Torres, and Ramirez’s (2023) findings on how economic survival often takes precedence over education. Moreover, inconsistent awareness of exam schedules highlights the critical need for improved communication and information dissemination.

Despite such challenges, resilience among students is evident. Most actively seek emotional and academic support from family members, facilitators, and peers, drawing on these networks to maintain motivation and push through barriers. Garcia (2021) proposes the synergistic potential of internal resilience and external assistance in establishing academic persistence, a finding supported by the present data. Additionally, studies by Reyes, Delos Santos, and Javier (2024) validate the role of community relationship resilience and facilitator engagement in enhancing learner commitment and motivation.

In short, ALS students balance a delicate mix of personal, family, and academic needs, often influenced by socioeconomic concerns. Program success should therefore maximize flexible scheduling, expanded networks of support, effective communication, and available educational resources. By operating holistically with these interconnected variables, ALS programs can better facilitate students in persisting and achieving their academic goals.

4.0 Conclusion

The study offers insightful details on the multifaceted and varied challenges faced by Alternative Learning System (ALS) students in preparation for and during the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination. Along with recognizing prevalent barriers—such as a lack of study time, challenging test items, onerous family obligations, and financial need—the study also identifies the remarkable resilience and positive leveraging of support systems on the part of the learners. This highlights the central role of inclusive, student-centered models in encouraging persistence and achievement in alternative education. The findings illustrate that while the resilience of the ALS program is contingent upon its inclusivity, community, flexibility, and access to resources, persistent socio-economic and family constraints limit participation to the fullest extent.

These findings respond to the call to advance educational support beyond program implementation to encompass the broader contextual matters that affect students' lives. In practice and policy in education, research suggests rolling out adaptable, student-responsive program designs that can serve various learner conditions with flexible schedules and targeted support. Socio-economic factors are the principal obstacles and should be a top priority; targeted financial and organizational resources, including examination-fee waivers, transportation, and childcare, should address these. Clarification of communication channels is crucial to ensure that information about exam procedures and accommodations is provided in a timely, accessible manner, thereby reducing uncertainty and maximizing access. Above all, the formation of collaborative relationships among families, communities, and education partners has the potential to develop empowering networks of support that successfully surmount external barriers and invigorate students.

For educational practice and policy, the study advocates for implementing flexible, learner-responsive program structures that accommodate diverse learner circumstances through adaptable scheduling and individualized support. Addressing socio-economic barriers should be a priority, with targeted financial and logistical assistance such as subsidies for exam fees, transportation, and childcare. Enhancing communication strategies to deliver clear, timely, and accessible information about exam processes and resources is crucial for reducing confusion and promoting engagement. Crucially, fostering collaborative partnerships among families, communities, and

educational stakeholders can build empowering support networks that effectively mitigate external challenges and motivate learners.

In the coming years, longitudinal research on learner follow-through over time will provide means to measure the long-term impact of individualized support interventions on persistence and accomplishment in ALS programs. Continuous examination of innovative methods—e.g., technology-enhanced instructional tools and community-based tutoring—will provide evidence for refining instructional processes. Further research on effective communication modalities specifically tailored for ALS learners' settings can enhance the sharing of information and participation. Additionally, research on psychosocial resilience will contribute to understanding learner persistence and achievement, particularly in relation to emotional and social support.

Overall, this study provides compelling evidence that adaptive program development and robust support systems are crucial in overcoming socio-economic and family barriers to promote the development and success of ALS learners. Taking these lessons into policy reforms and educational innovations can inform reforms aimed at making access equitable, empowering learners, and enhancing results in key tests such as the A&E, thereby strengthening alternative systems for marginalized groups.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

Flordeliza D. Sacabin - data analysis, encoding, editing, writing, and supervising. Nelly Ann G. Batonghinog and Rubelyn O. Torres- data analysis and encoding.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

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