



Original article

## The characterization of alternative learning system (ALS) passers in Danao City's tertiary institutions

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### ABSTRACT

This study, which employed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) theoretical model of narrative inquiry, describes Alternative Learning System (ALS) Accreditation and Equivalency (A & E) passers of Danao City pursuing tertiary education. It recounts their experiences, the challenges they have encountered, their coping mechanisms, and the institutions' measures to help them adjust in their studies. The participants selected through purposeful sampling were oriented on the study's nature and were made to sign an Informed Consent Form. To help them freely express their thoughts, an interview guide with open-ended questions was used in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to ascertain their experiences. Findings reveal that apart from the difficult circumstances concerning finances and serious family problems [among others] undergone by ALS graduates, they also had to endure, among other things, challenges in tackling academic tasks as well as juggling work and studies. Despite all these, the determination was expressed to carry on with the struggle for a college education. Although the realization of its importance came late to most of these students through the help of significant people in their lives, they pressed on by having adopted coping mechanisms such as reading to prepare for lessons and proper time management [among others]. Finally, despite the lack of programs for their smooth transition to college, the teachers' positive attitude afforded them a nurturing school climate. These findings bring to light not only these students' weaknesses and diverse experiences – the latter manifested as opportunities and threats to their pursuit of education and their strengths that facilitate the achievement of their educational goal.

**KEYWORDS:** *ALS passers, experiences, challenges, coping mechanism*

Equivalent to formal schooling, Alternative Learning System (ALS) is a free education program implemented by the Department of Education (DepEd) for youth and adults unable to complete formal primary education. Currently, ALS, which has been operating for the past five decades, includes Basic Literacy Program and Continuing Education Program-Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E), the program's two core components. By teaching basic literacy and numeracy, the former aims at the eradication of illiteracy among out-of-school youth and adults; whereas the latter, which is offered to both the primary- and secondary school levels, targets individuals "who are functionally literate but did not complete basic education" (Igarashi, p. 2, 2018). Both components are modular and flexible, which allows learning to occur at any time and in any place, depending on the learners' convenience and availability.

Operating in parallel, based on DepEd guidelines on the total number of ALS sessions and core educational content, "DepEd-delivered" and "DepEd-procured" ALS programs are implemented by DepEd (Igarashi, p. 15, 2018). Through its mobile teachers and ALS district coordinators, the former is directly affected by the agency. At the same time, the latter is carried out through external service providers hired by it through the Unified Contracting Scheme of ALS. These DepEd-managed delivery models are reinforced by local government units and non-governmental organizations that collaborate with DepEd in the delivery of ALS programs utilizing similar learning materials and abiding by the same instructional guidelines as the DepEd-managed ones.

DepEd has adopted a Results-Based Performance Management System that operates exclusively to reward a group. DepEd-procured program facilitators are monitored less often as they were not subject to the same institutional incentive structure being external contractors, unlike the DepEd-delivered program facilitators. The DepEd-linked of the latter career and strong incentives compel them to render high-quality work even without regular monitoring. This, according to World Bank Group's Igarashi, generates DepEd's monitoring approach for the ALS delivery inefficient (2018), which somehow undermines the efficacy of the

### 1 INTRODUCTION

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inclusion of ALS participants' attendance in the eligibility condition for the "4Ps" cash transfer program all to boost participants' presence in ALS sessions and increase the rates of program completion as well as A&E passers.

Completing the Continuing Education Program suggests that learners have been equipped with the knowledge and skills required to pass the A&E exam, which affords a passer an academic credential equivalent to an elementary and junior high school diploma. This becomes the ALS A&E passer's ticket to either land a job that requires a high school education as a minimum qualification or pursues higher education. However, the latter's reality entails a curriculum that includes difficult subjects like Math and Physics and rigorous training, which comes with numerous course requirements. Given this fact, college students are expected to exert an equally relentless effort in their studies to pass; ALS students are obliged to do the same or double the effort to succeed. With the shorter duration of and less exposure to a formal set-up, ALS students may become disoriented and eventually, dropping out from studies could be a possibility.

In 2017, Tindowen et al. claimed that ALS learners, despite having acquired local connection skills, are ill-equipped for the globalized world due to their low attainment of the required 21st-century skills. In 2018, Igarashi found that regardless of the inherent challenges in implementing adult learning programs, ALS has the potential to facilitate a fraction of students "further develop their human capital, with positive effects on their long-term educational outcomes and employment prospects" (p. 20). In 2019, Egcas & Garganera stressed that ALS contributes to improving the learners' educational attainment, monthly income of the family, employment status, and nature of the job.

Nevertheless, it has been observed that the number of academically unprepared students graduating from high school and entering community colleges has increased. Many continuation high school students who have completed their secondary education are not qualified either to go to college or even join the workforce, according to Robert Balfanz, PhD, Director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University (Ross, 2014). The problem is that they are at risk of leaving before degree completion (Sherwin, 2012).

With the implementation of the free tertiary education program in the country, there is a need to intensify efforts toward students' degree completion to maximize the government's spending on education, thereby supporting its endeavor to educate its citizens.

(Valeza et al., 2017; Foley and Pang, 2006; Taylor, 2011; Leek, 2009; Davila, 2011; Bond and Thomson, 2015) are just some of the numerous studies on 1) alternative education programs in high school, 2) factors that contribute to the success of these programs, 3) graduation rates, and 4) postsecondary plans of students.

However, studies on the challenges faced by ALS A&E passers while studying in college are limited, hence support for the government's endeavor to give disadvantaged students a chance at earning a college degree by ensuring students' program completion to maximize the free tertiary education could be rendered limited as well.

This study is therefore undertaken to have a better grasp of the ALS A&E passers pursuing tertiary education in Danao City. Attaining such meant that it is imperative to look into their experiences, to find out the challenges that confronted them, to ascertain if they can cope with college life despite their lack of preparation for certain subjects, and to determine the measures undertaken by the institutions to help them adjust in their studies.

## 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) theoretical model of narrative inquiry, an approach that centers on exploiting stories as data. These stories, according to Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk, (2007), "are collected as a means of understanding an educational experience as lived and told" through such inquiry that is set in people telling their stories which are detailed accounts of their experiences that may not be necessarily chronological (Maingano, 2016, Kim, 2016).

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) theoretical model of narrative inquiry involves three dimensions: interaction, temporality, continuity, and situation. Interaction is between personal and social dynamics that include feelings, hope, and aspirations. Continuity involves the past, present, and future, while condition refers to the context in which the story was experienced (Watson, 2014).

Narratives that reach out to the past are rooted in the present and turn an eye to the future; it evolves with changes and shifts in time, place, and interactions (Nkenge, 2018). This study's participants narrated their experiences when they stopped attending formal high school and the situation surrounding their entry to ALS classes. They related their experiences while attending tertiary education and what they want for themselves in the future. They shared their feelings, hopes, and aspirations as they told stories of their experiences.

The participants were the graduates of ALS who are studying in the tertiary institutions in Danao City. The students' lists were obtained from the Registrars after permission was granted by the institutions' head. The students were then contacted and invited to participate in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Arrangements were made to set up the most convenient time to carry out the activity.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure the

opportunity to choose participants who satisfy a given criterion, that is, longer time spent in college. The participants were selected based on a shared characteristic to serve a specific purpose (Bond, 2015). In this technique, knowledge and experience with the phenomenon determine participants' selection (Maingano, 2016, Robinson, 2014). The students at the higher level were given preference for their more extended stay in college. The students' distribution in the different courses was likewise accorded to get a balanced number of participants. However, this wasn't easy to realize since some students refused to participate in the FGD due to their work and study schedule. Other students who were invited were reluctant to participate for unknown reasons.

Of the six tertiary institutions in Danao City, one had no ALS passers enrolled; FGDs were conducted in only four of these schools. The participants from the two schools were few despite the effort exerted to contact many of the students. The others refused to participate or failed to come as scheduled. However, even if the number of participants in these schools did not reach 30%, it is still sufficient to get the needed information. Qualitative research does not have any definite rules on the number of participants for a study (deMarrais, 2004). It should matter less. Instead, the depth in which a participant's experiences are understood, analyzed, and re-presented should be given magnitude (Watson, 2014). Through this approach, a cohesive story can be weaved by capturing the depth of experiences and the voice of a small number of participants (Nkenge, 2018).

Ethical considerations were afforded due to deliberation. The advice was sought from the local Research Council regarding the matter before the research was conducted. In this study, the Informed Consent Form stressed the participants' anonymity, the voluntariness of their participation, and the confidentiality of the information gathered.

The discussions carried out in the unoccupied and comfortable rooms on the campus where the students are enrolled commenced with participants being oriented to the study's nature and voluntary participation. They were made to sign the Informed Consent Form, and the contents were explained to them. The FGD, which employed an interview guide to ascertain students' experiences before their college entry and in college, ensued. The guide questions were open-ended to help the students freely express their experiences. Subsequent results of the interview were transcribed and based on the transcription, thematic and SWOT analyses were carried out by 1) perusing the FGD transcript for data familiarization and in preparation for 2) systematically organizing the data by codes to reduce narratives into shorter strings or even terms, 3) exploring and creating themes with sub-problems, and 4) evaluating the newly-created themes to ensure they are reflective of the FGD transcript and that they address the sub-problems.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This portion comprises three parts: Part 1 presents the themes derived from the students' experiences leading up to their enrolment in ALS and their college experiences. Four themes were categorized into the strengths and weaknesses of and opportunities and threats for students. Part 2 presents students' challenges and coping mechanisms, while Part 3 introduces the tertiary institutions' measures to help the students adjust to college life.

#### **Part I. Experiences of Student-Participants Leading to ALS Enrolment and Their Experiences in College**

##### **Strength**

##### **Theme 1: Moving On Amid Financial Difficulty**

According to a World Bank Group's Igarashi (2018), despite the remarkable progress in expanding access to primary education, the education data in 2016 shows that about half of Filipino students struggle to complete basic knowledge on time.

Poverty remains one of the leading causes of the country's poor education record. The Philippine Statistics Authority said that around 53% of Out of School Child/Youths (OSCY) belongs to the bottom 30 percent of families based on per capita income. As a result of poverty, students may be in difficult situations and may have experiences that make attending traditional schools challenging. These can include pregnancy, serious illness, family problems, and more. Circumstances like these can make it difficult for a student to concentrate on classes, and they may need more individual support and flexible scheduling.

In response to the question "why did they stop schooling in high school," the study's participants narrated moving accounts of financial hardships and serious family problems. These caused them to drop out of formal school. They eventually either worked and simultaneously studied in ALS or stopped schooling from working and later enrolled in ALS.

*P1: I attended formal school from the first year to the third year; in my fourth year, I stopped and decided to take ALS.*

*My father got sick. He worked abroad and returned home with a nervous breakdown. At that time, my mother just gave birth, and the baby died. I wanted to help the family, so I stopped going to formal school. I worked from 8-12 as a baby sitter. I was paid 50 pesos. In the afternoon, from 1-5, I attended ALS classes. Being the older of two siblings, I was 16 years old and wanted to ease the family burden.*

*I passed ALS in 2013, worked in 2013-2018.*

*(Paused while thinking) Now that I am in college, my problem is still money, maikog mangayo ug kwarta. Because of financial difficulty, I am the one who finds ways to have money for expenses like books and my fare. Sometimes, I feel confused; I am behind my classmates, who are fresh graduates. But I think I am capable. Although I am discouraged sometimes, others continue to encourage me. I just keep on praying.*

*P3: I stopped schooling because of financial problems. We are 13 in the family, excluding my parents. I am the third and eldest daughter. My father is a fisherman, and my mother is a market vendor. At that time, my father was in prison. I was 15, in the Third Year of high school. I took summer classes in Chemistry and Math, my back subjects. I dropped out because of financial difficulty. At that time, I wanted to enjoy life. I thought, "why should I suffer when my parents have to send me to school?" I had experienced being in my uniform, and when I passed by the market to ask for money from my mother during exams, she would tell me, "you cannot go to school." Do not go to school anymore. Your father is in prison, think of him and not yourself first. I really love to go to school. But even if my father was only imprisoned for a month, we needed money to process his release. I have so many siblings too. When I was in high school, I did not have clearance at the end of the year because I had no money. I had no money for projects, no uniform (in tears). But still, I would be enrolled the following year. I was my teacher's favorite because I am somewhat knowledgeable.*

*I had been an out-of-school youth for around 10 years before enrolling in and passing the ALS examination. All this time, I never lose sight of my dream to finish college.*

These narratives depict the problematic situations encountered by students to complete primary education. But despite the difficulties, they were determined to continue in their struggle to be educated. Filipinos regard education as a way to improve themselves economically and socially. They look at it as a means to improve their standing in society. The aspiration of ALS passers inspires them to push through college. When asked about the challenges they encountered, many of them identified their most significant monetary burden. Many of them work while studying at the same time to support themselves.

*P23: Financial problem; although the tuition is free, we need to buy parts to assemble our projects.*

*P20: Financial burden because there are many events*

*that we have to attend and we spend money on these.*

*P10: To solve my problem, I engage in sidelining/part-time jobs. At times, I wash dishes in my mother's small eatery or fetch water to earn my school allowance.*

Students' desires and goals fuel their motivation and determination to persist and succeed in their studies, even when facing hardships or even discrimination.

*P22: I heard negative comments about ALS graduates, but I ignored them. I felt excited to study, happy to see new companions. Nakadungog ko sa gawas, sa may registrar dapit. "Ay ALS graduate ra man na siya." Gi-look down ang ALS. Gibalewala nako kay gusto kong moeskuyla.*

In a study by Ferguson (2006), a desire to become a professional, complete goal for self, and provide for their families were the main persistence factors identified. The students' desire may stem from strong awareness of personal responsibilities. These factors can be described as the intentions to provide a better life for one's family and to achieve better financial stability in the long-term (Bond & Thomson, 2015).

*P9: I belong to a big family. I am the fourth child. My older siblings got married at a young age. I love to become a policewoman. I dreamt of owning a piece of land, not living in someone else's lot so that we will not be treated as slaves. We can also set our priorities and not that of the landowner. Also, I want to repay my mother's numerous debts.*

Although the students experienced arduous situations, they were able to finish their primary education through the ALS. As ALS passers of A&E in Danao City, they enrolled in college hoping to get a degree for themselves and their families since a college diploma is considered a means to have good-paying jobs. Sherwin (2012) stressed that in the 21st century, the majority of students would need some postsecondary education courses to earn a respectable wage.

## **Weaknesses**

### **Theme 2: Misguided Priorities**

The National Statistics Office 2003 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reported that individuals aged 6-24 decided to forego attending school for employment or "looking for work," with almost one-third or 30.5 percent citing such as the primary reason. Lack of personal interest came in second at 22 percent. The 2013 FLEMMS covered around 36 million population aged 6 to 24 years. According to the survey, one in every ten or about 4 million Filipino children and youth was out-of-school in

2013. The 2013 FLEMMS results also showed that of the nearly 4 million out-of-school children and youth, 22.9 percent has entered into union or marriage. Another 19.2 percent cited insufficient family income as the reason for opting against either sending a child to school or attending school.

Moreover, a 2016 survey by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) claimed that one in every 10 Filipinos aged between 6 and 24 years is an out-of-school child/youth. Among females, "marriage or family matters" was the main reason for dropping out (59.3%); "lack of interest" (36.5%), on the other hand, was the principal reason among males. The adolescents have other concerns and interests; hence school seems to be of the least importance. Their attention is easily distracted by seemingly more entertaining and enjoyable activities. Consequently, school work and activities are neglected.

In many instances, the behaviour of the students is influenced by peers. They can encourage positive behaviours, but they can also promote misconduct or inappropriate actions. Peer influence should not be underestimated (Corpuz et al., 2010). A student's expectations, goals, and values regarding academics are shaped in part by their peers and her/his relationship with those peers. (Leek, 2009) The students' lack of interest in school was reflected in participants' responses; three of whom mentioned their peers' influence or *barkada*.

*P5: I was addicted to the computer, influenced by friends. As a result, I frequently cut classes. I stopped in 2008, enrolled in ALS in 2014. The following year, I passed.*

*P19: As a teenager, I was influenced by my barkada, I had plenty of absences and tardiness, so I stopped schooling for 5 years.*

*P10: I was the only second year of high school because of the bad influence of my barkada. I impregnated my girlfriend, so I decided to work. I worked for 7 years.*

*P26: I repeated my First Year three times, my Second Year two times, and my Third Year two times. Nagbugoy-bugoy. My mother finally made me stop schooling.*

Their preference showed their lack of interest in engaging in other activities such as computer games, being distracted by romantic relationships and becoming truants: cutting classes, absenteeism, academic failures, illegitimate pregnancy, and dropping out from school. In many instances, the reasons for leaving school are interrelated. Lack of interest leads to academic failures

or results in illegitimate pregnancy, which will lead to early marriage. Students' personal life experiences, including premature adult responsibilities like parenthood, are among the reasons students drop out (Bond & Thomson, 2015).

*P4: I finished 4<sup>th</sup> year but had failures. I got married and had a child. I was a visitor in ALS about one month before the examination. But I pursued it and passed.*

*P18: I was pregnant in March during my 3<sup>rd</sup> year. I stopped for 1 year then enrolled in 4<sup>th</sup> year (2008); I did not continue because I took care of the baby. I stopped for a year, and then in 2011, I enrolled in ALS. I would bring the child while attending classes. I got the result of the exam a year after. During my graduation from ALS, I was pregnant with my second child. I was already married.*

The participants' narratives suggest that they did not give much importance to their studies at this time. Their behaviour manifests a lack of interest in school, and their attention is focused on other activities. Put merely, schooling was not their priority, and realization about the importance of education came late. Studies conducted by Foley & Pang (2006) and Watson (2014) revealed that students enrol in alternative programs because they are failing, truant, displaying disruptive behaviour, pregnant, or exhibiting other similar factors that can lead to leaving high school.

## **Opportunities**

### **Theme 3: Another Chance at Success**

At some point, students realize the importance of education and strive to turn their lives around and make better choices than before. Often, this comes about with the help and encouragement of significant people in their lives.

In the Philippines, ALS was established by the government to provide all Filipinos the chance to have access to and complete primary education in a mode that fits their distinct situations and needs.

The following is an inspiring account worthy of a *telenovela*.

*P3: When I went home, I met someone who invited me to attend their church service. I was converted to their religion, "Born Again." I was sent to Cebu Missionary Foundation, Inc. This supports orphans and the sick. There were a church and house for their volunteers inside the compound. The Director is Australian. Most of our visitors are foreigners. There, I was trained and became a volunteer, one among the forty at that time. My outlook was changed, and I already had an ambition in life. I stayed in the compound, and when they opened ALS classes in the dumpsite, I enrolled and passed the*

examination afterward. I was already 25 years old. I had stopped schooling for around 10 years. I entered college because I was challenged by my boyfriend's life story, now my husband, who became an orphan at a very young age. He is now a pastor, an AB- Theology graduate. He told me that we could not blame other people for our miserable condition.

Educational prospects manifested later on in their lives with the help and encouragement of significant people who support their studies and success.

*P18: I have an aunt who advised me to enrol in ALS. Since I have children already, it's difficult to attend classes from Monday-Friday. In ALS, I could bring my child with me. My older sister offered to support my studies.*

*P21: I enrolled in ALS because of my child. It was 2005 when I stopped schooling after my second year. I got married and bore a child in 2010. I studied ALS in 2014 while my child was in kindergarten. My husband, a professional, encouraged me to pursue my studies. I also had a married neighbour, who was an ALS student. They encouraged me to continue.*

Sometimes, realizing the importance of education happens through one's judgment, not from the family.

*P26: Because of truancy, my mother finally made me stop schooling. After I stopped for two years, I decided to continue in ALS. I realized that it's easier to find a job if one has a diploma. I supported my schooling because my mother no longer spent on my needs.*

At other times, realization happens due to symbolic models. As stated in Albert Bandura's Social Learning theory, symbolic models also influence a person's behavior. This can be an action portrayed in other media such as videotape, TV, and computer programs.

*P7: I was encouraged by a television program that I saw on TV. It featured a 60-year-old man who graduated cum laude. I said to myself, "oh, he was able to do it." "I could do it too, still finish school."*

Since Filipinos look at education as the key to success and a good life, many students want to pursue college. This aspiration to carry on with higher education is shaped by environmental factors such as family or community expectations. Their desire to enrol in postsecondary courses may be attributed to personal interest and motivation, and parents' encouragement and peer influence (Bond & Thomson, 2015).

This is evident in student-participants' responses who shared that the encouragement of family, community expectations, and personal interest serve as motivating

force to get a diploma.

*P17: Papa and Lola encouraged me. I really loved going to school. I was embarrassed when asked about my schooling because my mother is a teacher. I was still in Grade 8 when supposedly I would already be a college student. My first career choice was Tourism. But one time, I went with my mother to her work station. I realized that teaching is admirable. And now, I'm studying to become a teacher.*

One participant, out to prove herself, was given a chance to proceed to the college by a supportive husband.

*P21: (teary-eyed) I studied in college for my family, for my child, and to prove to my father that it's different if one has a degree. I am the second of a brood of 7 girls, and my father did not support us. Now, I am keeping two younger sisters. One is graduating from BSIT. I would like to make my father realize that his outlook on education is wrong. It is my husband who supports our studies.*

Aside from a supportive family, one student was excited to continue college because of successful acquaintances who are also ALS graduates. This can certainly be explained by Bandura's Social Learning Theory of a person being influenced or reinforced by a model. It could be a live model, an actual person demonstrating the behavior.

*P24: During college, I have no experience of being looked down on. Confidence lang gyod kay duna man koy mga kaila nga bisan ug ALS graduate, na professional na. I am excited because I am already in the first step of my dream. I am in the night session because I planned to work during the day. But my family supports my schooling. That's why I am not working. I am confident because I have acquaintances who are already professionals. One is a Marine Engineer, who is already onboard a ship.*

The heroes are the students who work persistently to challenge the stereotypical assumptions made about their ability to be successful (Watson, 2014).

*P21: I wanted to enrol in the College of Education, but they said that the department does not accept ALS graduates. I understand that; I know that the program is challenging. I like HM too. I love cooking. Just because I'm an ALS graduate doesn't mean I am cognitively slow. In my case, I am an honor student. I graduated with my associate degree with honors. Proud ko, ibangon ba, nga bisan ALS kaya nako.*

The ALS passers had adverse and also inspiring

experiences that gave them a chance to proceed to college. Their interest, the encouragement of essential people in their lives, and other people's influence motivate them to continue and excel in their studies.

## **Threats**

### **Theme 4: Obstacles in Pursuit of Education**

The educational journey of an ALS passer from high school to college is not comfortable. Along the way, some circumstances and people threaten their goal of getting a college degree.

In a traditional society, it was the man who works and supports the family financially. The woman was the homemaker, taking care of the children. For this reason, parents did not see the value of educating their daughters, believing that a high school or college diploma is not necessary to do house chores. This is the case of one study-participant.

*P21: I stopped schooling because of my father; he does not want to send his children to school. I was only in the second year of high school then. Papa's outlook is that girls should stay at home.*

There are also unexpected and challenging situations faced by the students. Others call it a twist of fate.

*P16: At first, I thought that graduating from ALS is enough for me. I thought that I would no longer go to college. Being the youngest, I enjoyed just accompanying my parents. I was spoiled because my older siblings were already working, and I was given my needs. Ate told me to go to school. My father wanted me to become a teacher because he observed that our teacher- neighbours have big houses. I wanted to become a lawyer but realized that we lacked the money to finance my studies. I decided to enrol in Criminology instead, even if my father opposed it because he believes that the eventual work is risky. Just when I already enjoyed schooling, problems occurred (tearfully relating). My mother got sick; my older brother was laid-off from work. We had financial difficulty. My family wanted me to stop schooling.*

In other instances, the students find themselves in situations that incite doubts in their capacity to succeed and stir feelings of unworthiness and discrimination.

*P13: Every time there is a gathering, I felt that other family members look down on me. I felt being left out. I was not invited to my cousin's important events adding to my unimportance feeling in many instances. That is the reason why my father encouraged me to finish college and become a professional.*

*P18: When I applied for admission to the college, the*

*other courses were already closed. Only Electronics, HM, and IT were open. Others said that IT is complicated. So, I decided to apply to Electronics. My partner is against the idea because he believes that the course is not for women. Later on, I realized that there was a vacant slot in HM. But as an ALS graduate, I felt that others looked down on us because we had low average grades. Those with low average were placed in the night session. But then, I realized that that is better for me because I can take care of my child during the day. But, is ALS like that? I- looked down ang graduates? I heard remarks like: why are the ALS graduates accepted here? Pila ra may average ana nila oi. That put doubts in my head nga basin di sad nako kaya.*

*P9: When I was in the First Year, some teachers would ask, "who are ALS graduates here?" May feeling ko nga gi look- down. "Do you know how to read?" I felt awkward. There are teachers like that. Then they would comment, "ah it's like that because they are just ALS graduates". In the First Year, someone listed down our names, and I wondered why.*

*P13: I experienced the same. I heard the teacher saying, "does not know how to read because of being an ALS passer."*

*P21: In the second semester during my second year, the office staff announced who was included in the Dean's List. My classmates reacted that I was on the list. "Nganong na Dean's list man nga ALS man na siya? They traced my grades, I was really qualified. I was hurt that they don't trust me.*

The foregoing narratives show that the students encountered difficult circumstances that gave way to negative feelings in them. These threaten the attainment of their educational goals.

## **Part II. Challenges Faced by Students While Studying in College**

### **Weaknesses**

#### **Theme 5: Unpreparedness for Academic Tasks**

The number of academically unprepared students graduating high school and entering community colleges has increased. The problem is that they are at risk of leaving before degree completion (Sherwin, 2012). At present, many continuation high school students who have completed their secondary education are not qualified either to go to college or even join the workforce, according to Robert Balfanz, PhD, Director of the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University (Ross, 2014). The same belief was expressed by Ferguson (2006), stating that students are often

unprepared for the rigors of college. As observed by ALS division supervisor Dr. Diosdado Medina, subjects like Math and Physics are already included in college. Since ALS students were not trained in those, they become traumatized.

When asked about the problems and challenges they met while studying in college, they expressed their difficulties in tackling academic tasks.

*P5: It is difficult to catch-up, understands the lessons. I did not have these subjects in ALS, especially Math. I just attended classes, and I was able to reach the second year.*

*P6: Math subject. Even if I listen to discussions, it is complicated. Oral recitation is difficult too.*

*P26: I find my subjects difficult at first, like Physics & Chemistry. "Unsaon man gyud ni oi." Sciences are difficult.*

One expressed difficulty in academic subjects as well as juggling work and studies.

*P29: Physics and Math are really difficult. I had removal in the subjects, but I passed. I find reporting somewhat difficult because I have not experienced it in my first year of high school. Pero mada ra man. Being self-supporting is also hard. It's tiresome to study after work. I am a taho vendor.*

Others consider reporting and memorization as their problem and a major challenge.

*P28: It's in reporting that I am really nervous about. Especially that in giving a report, we need to speak English and that is difficult for me.*

*P2: I am now in the Third Year. My biggest challenge is reporting because there is no reporting in ALS. The first time that I was given a topic, I felt that I had no choice even if I was afraid and ashamed to report in class.*

*P7: To memorize. I'm weak in memorization.*

One expressed her concern about the difficulty of lessons in general.

*P11: When I entered college, I realized that it's hard. On my first day, I really had no idea about the lessons. These are difficult mostly when one does not listen to the teacher. One cannot understand, especially without stock knowledge.*

### **Coping Mechanism**

### **Strength**

#### **Theme 6: Strategies to Succeed**

Even with a lack of training and preparation for the different academic tasks expected to be performed, college students find ways to cope with postsecondary challenges. Two students shared inspiring stories about how they cope with college life.

*P16: I have beautiful experiences and memories in college. I enrolled in October during the second semester. We were only 20 plus, only two female students. So we felt pampered. Not long after, the other female got married. So, I was even more pampered by my classmates. They called me "baby sister" and "princess." I was so inspired to attend classes. I did not know about the Dean's list. It was our Dean who noticed my remarkable grades and asked for them from the Registrar. In the entrance examination, I also had the highest score. Even when I was in the elementary and secondary level, I participated in contests outside the school. Now that I am in the Second Year of college, my family no longer has the money to finance my studies. One of my teachers, who recognized my talent, helped me be accepted as a working student. I was given the option to choose where to be assigned. I preferred to be assigned to the library so that I can read my assignments in advance. I was the one who decided on my program, so I am really exerting effort in my studies. I want my parents to be proud of me. Our Dean also encourages me to read to improve my spelling and vocabulary. Last summer, I suggested to my "kuyas" (Senior students whom I consider my older siblings) that it would be better to have 5 "learnings" for the day. I would ask for useful information/ knowledge from them. Besides, they requested another Dean's lister to teach me. I also collaborate with my classmates in studying.*

*P17: I was mocked by my ALS classmates who did not pass the ALS examination. They would say "ay ang ako classmate sa ALS maestra na" to which I would reply "Ing-ana jud na day." But not inside this college. In the First Year, when I introduced myself, I said I am proud to be a product of ALS. Considering that I was just Grade 8, I was behind in lessons. In the First Year, I have a Math subject. They don't find Math hard? But in my case, I have Calculus. That is difficult. But I am not ashamed to ask questions. Also, I am thankful to my classmates because I feel that they trust me. I became a member of our organization in SPED, my major. That was a confirmation of their trust. I am proud that I can compete with other students, even if I am an ALS graduate. So, everything depends on us, on our efforts. It was my teacher who told me to compute my grades and to submit them to the office. One of my male classmates seemed to doubt my capability to not be in their level as*

*an ALS graduate. I had mixed emotions then. I felt ashamed and proud, too, because I am in college because of ALS.*

Like other students, they cope by preparing for the daily lessons by reading, studying, and taking down discussions.

*P1: In my course, Education, one must be prepared. In my case, I read and study. I prepare for my lessons.*

*P2: One must study to understand the lessons.*

*P11: In order to cope, one must listen. Whatever will be taken up must be written down.*

*P3: Just like in my lower years. I think I'm capable of my studies. If one listens to the teacher and studies the lessons, then there would be no problem.*

*P28: I am nervous about reporting. I would prepare my report, translated in English, word for word, my explanation.*

Others recognize proper time management, attending classes regularly, and cooperative learning as effective ways to cope.

*P3: Proper time management. I should not be distracted by my business, especially during tests. I should have handouts of my lessons so that I can study.*

*P6: Time Management*

*P5: I was always present in class, so I received a perfect attendance certificate.*

*P8: Cooperative learning in math with friends.*

One student sought moral support from her mother, while another displayed a favorable attitude about other people's views.

*P9: I would tell my mother my problems and displeasure in school.*

*P12: I just ignore discriminatory comments. I exert effort so that people will change their views about us.*

The ALS passers had encountered different challenges while studying in college. These challenges are related to financial problems and difficulties in tackling academic tasks. However, they were able to adopt strategies to cope with the challenges encountered.

### **Part III. Measures of Tertiary Institutions**

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

### **Theme 7: A Nurturing School Climate to Thrive**

Stewart (2007) and Leek (2008) reported that school climate is vital to the learning process and the school's educational mission's heart and soul. Perceptions of school climate reflect how a student feels about the school culture's academic environment. Students' perceptions of school climate contribute to their interest levels and their interactions with teachers and fellow students. School climate affects students' sense of belonging or the extent to which students feel accepted, respected, and supported in schools.

A significant part of the school climate is the teachers who are in constant contact with the students. The teachers' favorable attitude towards the students helps them cope with their problems and college requirements.

*P1: Not only to ALS passers but to students who are behind in class. The teachers have a heart to heart talk with us; they try to know our problems.*

*P23: Some teachers are considerate, especially upon knowing that we are ALS graduates. "Dugaydugay na ming wa kaeskuyla, natay-an na mi.*

*P7: My teachers are not aware that I am an ALS passer. I just exert effort in my studies. Try to blend in and go with the group. The teachers encourage us to study.*

*P3: The school and the teachers are considerate in the payment of our school fees because many are working students and are mothers.*

One student-participant shared about the assistance afforded by her Math teacher, her adviser, and classmates that helped her adjust in college.

*P17: One of my teachers helped me cope. She gave me handouts in Math, especially at the time when I was behind in the subject. She did coaching too, and I was not ashamed to approach her to ask for help. My adviser let me participate in training to boost my self-confidence. My classmates were very helpful also. So, I was able to adjust.*

When asked about measures undertaken by the school to help them adjust in college, one student answered:

*P2: None. The school does not have a unique program for us, no measures to help us. But still, it's okay. Other students don't look down on us because we are ALS graduates. Many do not know that we are ALS graduates.*

When asked the same question, the other participants revealed no program and no measures to help their smooth transition to college life. But they believe this is favorable on their part.

*P27: In the first place, the school accepted us, and there is no discrimination. There are no boundaries between ALS & regular students. We are treated equally and just like the others. We are happy about that. We are not singled out as different. Malipay na gyud mi sa motivation sa teachers. Verbal reinforcement like when we give a report, the teacher would say "very good." That would really make us happy. And that is enough for us.*

*P25: I don't want to be singled out, no discrimination. I don't want to be given special treatment. If we are separated, we will be identified. Others may say, "ay mga ALS na oi, nilukso ra na". It is better to be with the majority.*

The students were not aware of the tertiary institution's measures or actions to help them adjust to college life. However, they still considered this favourable because they do not want to be singled out or be given special attention as ALS passers. All they want is to blend in with the rest of the students.

The school climate is perceived as nurturing and constructive because of the teachers' positive attitude towards them. This perception amplifies the students' determination to press on with their studies to earn a degree. The persistence to remain in school was supported by multiple factors, including teachers listening to students and communicating with them (Williams, 2011). On the other hand, postsecondary institutions have goals to improve the retention and graduation of students, particularly the ones who come from underrepresented populations. If those goals are to be realized, colleges may develop an even more positive campus climate and culture in which students, especially the economically and academically disadvantaged ones, can succeed (Taylor, 2011).

These findings reveal that apart from the difficult circumstances concerning finances and serious family problems [among others] undergone by ALS passers, they also had to endure, inter alia, challenges in tackling academic tasks and juggling work and studies in college. Despite all these, the determination was expressed to carry on with the struggle for a college education. Although the realization of its importance came late to most of these students through the help of significant people in their lives, they pressed on by having adopted coping mechanisms such as reading to prepare for lessons and proper time management [among others]. Finally, despite the lack of programs for their smooth transition to college, the teachers' positive attitude afforded them a nurturing school climate. These findings

bring to light not only these students' weaknesses and diverse experiences – the latter manifested as opportunities and threats to their pursuit of education and their strengths that facilitate the achievement of their educational goal

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Findings prove that the ALS passers' diverse experiences in high school and college were [among others] financial and familial afforded them opportunities. In contrast, others proved as threats to their pursuit of education. Additionally, while they manifested weaknesses, juggling academic and work challenges [among others] in college, they demonstrated their strength displayed as coping mechanisms such as reading to prepare for lessons and proper time management. These helped them endure difficulties while the teachers' positive attitude, despite the lack of programs for their smooth transition to college, further afforded ALS passers a nurturing school climate in tertiary institutions. This may also facilitate the completion of these ALS passers' college education despite their delayed realization of its value.

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