





Alternative Learning System (ALS) as a Tool for Social Reintegration: Former Inmate Learners' Perspective

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Abstract

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) is a vital tool for rehabilitating Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) in the Philippines; however, its success in social reintegration is poorly understood from the learners' long-term, post-release perspectives. To address this critical gap, this qualitative case study investigated the long-term experiences of six (n=6) former BJMP inmate learners who completed the ALS program and successfully transitioned back into society. Thematic analysis revealed that ALS functions as a profound internal catalyst, providing essential tangible educational attainment (e.g., a diploma) and fostering significant psychological and social empowerment (e.g., renewed confidence, reduced shame). Despite this internal transformation, the study's central finding is that ALS's long-term efficacy is ultimately compromised by external, systemic barriers. Specifically, the absence of mandated post-release follow-up from correctional institutions, coupled with pervasive societal stigma and prejudice from employers and the community, effectively neutralizes the educational achievement. The findings highlight a crucial need for policy intervention that shifts the focus from solely providing education to mandating sustained post-release support and actively combating societal prejudice, ensuring ALS fulfills its potential as a true tool for successful social reintegration.

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental right that extends to all individuals, including Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs). In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as a critical bridge for marginalized learners, offering second-chance education to those unable to access formal schooling. Within the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP), the ALS plays a crucial role in inmate rehabilitation, addressing educational deficits, fostering personal development, and ultimately aiming to reduce recidivism and enhance public safety. The importance of prison education is widely documented, with program participants generally exhibiting lower recidivism rates and improved post-release employment opportunities (DepEd, 2020; Erbs & Ferreira, 2020; Gheorghieva, 2024; Vujičić, 2024).

Despite the consensus on the critical benefits of educational programs in correctional facilities, a notable gap remains in the existing academic literature regarding the long-term, post-release efficacy of these programs. The vast majority of studies focus on institutional outcomes—such as recidivism statistics, program implementation challenges, or pre- and post-test knowledge assessments—rather than the personal, lived experiences of learners once they return to society. While studies confirm ALS's role in rehabilitation, they often fail to thoroughly explore the specific mechanisms through which ALS contributes to successful social reintegration (e.g., securing employment, rebuilding social networks, or developing self-efficacy and resilience). This limited focus means the transformative process itself is often poorly understood.

Thus, this study aims to fill that critical gap by investigating the long-term, post-release perspectives of former BJMP inmate learners on the ALS as a tool for social reintegration. By moving beyond institutional metrics and examining the subjective experiences of those who have successfully transitioned, this research is the first to uncover the specific mechanisms (e.g., skill acquisition, renewed confidence, enhanced social capital) by which ALS directly facilitates or hinders the journey of former learners back into the Philippine society. The findings of this study will illuminate the true rehabilitative and transformative power of education in correctional institutions, ultimately providing actionable insights for policy improvements and enhancing ALS implementation to create a more inclusive and equitable educational system in the Philippines.

Literature Review

The literature widely documents the importance of prison education as a transformative tool for individuals with PDLs, emphasizing its role in rehabilitation and successful social reintegration. Studies show that participation in educational programs significantly leads to lower recidivism rates and improved post-release employment opportunities (DepEd, 2020; Erbs & Ferreira, 2020; Gheorghieva, 2024; Vujičić, 2024).

Theoretical Foundations of ALS for Incarcerated Individuals

The ALS serves as a crucial developmental pathway within the BJMP. Literature indicates that ALS contributes to personal growth and well-being by providing essential educational opportunities, enabling learners to acquire

elementary or high school diplomas (Arzadon, 2015). Participation in these growth-oriented programs fosters enhanced self-esteem and self-direction (LEE et al., 2023) and promotes emotional and social development, ultimately leading to improved resilience (Guerrero et al., 2024; Mateu-Pérez et al., 2024). Beyond personal development, ALS significantly enhances employability and economic stability through non-formal education focused on crucial skills such as e-commerce, entrepreneurship, and vocational training (Ramos et al., 2023). The Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) program within ALS improves qualifications for further education or employment (Igarashi, 2018). Furthermore, ALS is vital for successful social reintegration as it enhances literacy and basic education (Azarcon, 2014), aligning with broader evidence that prison education and work programs effectively reduce recidivism (Santos & Pereira, 2024).

Systemic Challenges to Implementation and Reintegration

Despite the clear benefits, literature consistently identifies several systemic challenges to effective implementation and sustainability. A key issue is the necessity for a holistic approach to rehabilitation, which requires programs to be tailored to inmates' unique needs, including crucial psychological and social support (Erbs & Ferreira, 2020; Gheorghieva, 2024). Former inmates frequently have lower educational attainment and often carry psychological scars, creating a critical need for specialized trauma and anxiety support that is frequently absent (Barroso, 2024; Grove, 2011). Furthermore, significant barriers to access and quality persist. Programs encounter challenges such as resource limitations, inadequate monitoring, and limited program awareness (Ramos et al., 2023). This difficulty is compounded by the lack of access to modern educational technologies, which widens the gap between prison learning and the demands of the real world (Farley, 2022). Lastly, the issue of societal stigma remains a pervasive and consistent barrier to the progress of former inmates (Barroso, 2024; Grove, 2011; Hassan & Kahar, 2014). To overcome this, initiatives that foster community involvement and tailor educational content are crucial for shifting societal perceptions and ensuring successful reintegration (Bayliss, 2003; Conway, 2023; Hassan & Kahar, 2014).

Strategies for Program Enhancement

To effectively enhance prison education outcomes, the literature points to a combination of tailored pedagogy, robust monitoring, and strong collaboration. Educational resilience is significantly fostered through a tailored and innovative pedagogy, which includes providing culturally relevant curricula and supportive services, such as mentorship and counselling (Lea, 2017). Effective monitoring and support are also crucial, involving standardized monitoring protocols and utilizing technology for timely interventions (Blossey et al., 2000; Lee, 2019). Finally, the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of these programs rely heavily on collaboration and partnerships. Leveraging contributions from stakeholders, including financial support from local government units and resource sharing from organizations such as TESDA, is vital (Cayabas et al., 2023).

Method

This research employed a Qualitative Case Study Design to gain an in-depth understanding of the ALS's role in

post-release social reintegration. Participants consisted of six (6) former Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), who were selected using a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy to ensure relevance to the study's objective; specifically, participants must have completed the ALS program, been released for a minimum of twelve (12) months, and met the criteria for successful social reintegration (defined as no recorded recidivism and active employment or vocational training for at least six months).

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (lasting 45-90 minutes), following rigorous ethical protocols that included documented Informed Consent, full confidentiality using pseudonyms (e.g., KI1, KI2), and researcher training in managing sensitive topics. The resulting interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase Thematic Analysis to systematically identify key patterns and themes. Trustworthiness was established through member checking and maintaining a detailed audit trail of the coding process, ensuring the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Results

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed four primary findings, organized into three core themes regarding the perceived roles of ALS and one encompassing theme detailing the challenges to successful reintegration. The findings confirm that while ALS is a potent catalyst for internal change, its long-term efficacy is severely constrained by systemic post-release barriers.

Theme 1. The Foundation of Tangible Educational Attainment

Participants uniformly emphasized the ALS program as providing the essential, tangible documentation (a diploma) necessary to re-engage with society. Their perception centered on the program's ability to correct past educational deficiencies and provide a visible certification of learning, which immediately enhanced their perceived employability. This progress transcended simple skills, moving the participants through academic levels previously thought impossible. This is further exemplified by the participants' comment:

"No read no write man ko. Gikan sa grade 1 hangtud sa grade 3 dayun proceed dayun ko sa grade 6. Dayun nitake dayun kos Junior High School dayun graduation dayun Senior High School. Paabot nalang kos akoang graduation sa SHS." [I struggle with reading and writing. I started in Grade 1, then jumped to Grade 6 after completing the earlier grades. After that, I attended Junior High School, graduated, and then moved on to Senior High School. I am just waiting for my SHS graduation.] – KI1

Another key element of this theme was the perceived increase in economic stability derived from the vocational components integrated into the ALS curriculum, which participants directly linked to securing employment immediately after release.

"Nakatabang ang ALS sa trabaho. Dali ra kaayu ko nadawat sa akoang trabaho. Diretso ra, kung pangitaan kog diploma pakit-on nako." [ALS helped me in applying for a job, and I secured the position

with ease. They asked for my diploma, and I showed it right away.] – KI2

Theme 2. Psychological and Social Empowerment

Beyond academic credentials, the ALS was perceived as a powerful agent of internal, psychological transformation. Participants reported a significant boost in confidence, a reduction in social shame, and a definitive shift from dwelling on their past incarceration to focusing on present and future opportunities. Improved literacy and language skills (particularly English) served as the foundation for this self-assurance. This is reflected in the following extract:

“Nindut kaayu siya kay din-a ka maghunahuna sa imuhang past, maghunahuna nakas imuhang present. Dako nga tabang gyud ang ALS, din-a ko mailad.” [It's great to see that I can forget my past and focus more on the present. ALS taught me a lot and helped me avoid being deceived.] – KI1

This increased confidence translated directly into social engagement and entrepreneurial activities, such as online commerce, which previously felt inaccessible due to embarrassment.

“Maglisud gyud ko sauna sa English. Maglisud kog basa. Mauwaw ko muistorya og bisan gamay nga English. Karon kay dili nako mauwaw mupost sa akoang mga baligya sa Facebook. Nana koy gamayng English.” [I found English quite challenging before and often felt embarrassed when I spoke, even a little. Now, I am confident in posting my items on Facebook, and I have learned a bit of English.] – KI3

Theme 3. The Broken Bridge: Post-Release System Failures

Despite achieving high levels of internal change, participants faced impossible external challenges that damaged the practical application of their ALS education. These barriers represented a significant gap between institutional intent and real-world outcome.

Insufficient Post-Release Support. There is an absolute lack of systematic follow-up or structured transition programs from the BJMP or ALS after release.

“Untag makagawas nakas presohan, naa say follow up ang taga BMJP kung gaunsa na me sa gawas. Sa akoang case, wala man.” [I was hoping that once released from prison, the BMJP would conduct a follow-up on how we're faring outside. For me, personally, there wasn't any follow-up.] – KI4

Bridging the Institutional-World Gap. The curriculum and resources within the facility are sometimes misaligned with external market demands, particularly in areas that require digital or precise technical skills.

“Sa BJMP, wala may computer ngadto. Bawal ang cellphone. Nindut untag naa say computer unta kay gamit kaayu nganhi ig panarbaho nimu sa gawas.” [Within the BJMP facility, computers are unavailable, and cellphones are prohibited. It would be beneficial if computers were provided, as they

are highly valuable for employment opportunities once released.] – KI6

Pervasive Societal Stigma and Judgment. The greatest challenge noted was the enduring prejudice from the community and potential employers, which invalidates the value of the diploma upon background checks.

Pero kung mo-apply ko og trabaho, inigkakita pa lang nila sa background, o inigka-pangutana nila sa akong resume, mora na lang og nawala ang diploma." [But when I apply for a job, as soon as they see the background check or ask about the gap in my resume, it's like the diploma disappears.] – KI6

Discussion

The findings confirm that the ALS serves as a powerful internal catalyst for former inmates, successfully instilling confidence and addressing educational deficits. However, the study reveals that the long-term efficacy of this transformation is severely broken by external, systemic barriers, namely the lack of institutional follow-up and pervasive societal stigma that neutralizes their educational achievement.

ALS as an Internal Catalyst vs. External System Barriers

The study settles the transformative potential of the ALS program, validating existing literature (Arzadon, 2015; Rahmawati et al., 2024) by demonstrating that it effectively facilitates personal growth (Theme 1) and enhances self-esteem (Theme 2). However, this research uncovers the critical gap established in the Introduction by analyzing post-release perspectives: while ALS successfully addresses internal barriers (such as a lack of education and confidence deficit), its ultimate contribution to social reintegration success is severely compromised by external, systemic failures (Theme 3).

The psychological empowerment noted by participants—the confidence to engage in online commerce or converse with family (KI3, KI4)—demonstrates that ALS achieves its objective of instilling a positive, future-oriented mindset (LEE et al., 2023). This provides a crucial mechanism of transformation that previous quantitative studies on recidivism often overlook. The acquisition of vocational skills that are immediately applicable, such as those derived from livelihood projects (KI5), reinforces the strong link between practical training and economic stability (Santos & Pereira, 2024).

The Neutralizing Effect of Stigma and Systemic Absence

Despite these internal successes, the most salient finding is the neutralizing effect of post-release challenges. The participants' plea for follow-up (KI4) and a structured post-release program (KI6) aligns directly with the established need for a holistic approach to rehabilitation that extends beyond the prison gate (Barroso, 2024). The current absence of follow-up from BJMP or ALS is a missed opportunity for timely intervention and contradicts effective reintegration models (Shoham & Haviv, 2024).

Furthermore, the experience of having the diploma "disappear" upon a background check (KI6) is a powerful illustration of how societal stigma remains the dominant barrier to long-term success. While education has been proven to lower recidivism and enhance employability (Hassan & Kahar, 2014), this external prejudice weakens the internal transformation. This suggests that the next phase of PDL reintegration policy must shift focus from inmate education to community and employer acceptance. Finally, the reported limitations in basic resources, such as the lack of computer access within the facility (KI6), highlight a critical misalignment in the curriculum that exacerbates the divide between institutional learning and the modern job market, which increasingly demands digital literacy (Farley, 2022).

Limitations and Policy Implications

The limitations of this qualitative study include its small sample size ($n=6$) and the purposive, criterion-based sampling method, which naturally restricts the generalizability of the findings; furthermore, reliance on self-reported measures of "success" may introduce social desirability bias, suggesting that future research should utilize longitudinal designs to quantitatively track employment and social metrics over longer periods and expand the sample size to include varying levels of reintegration success.

Based on the direct experiences of the former learners, this study offers three practical policy implications: first, to Mandate Post-Release Monitoring, the ALS and BJMP must collaborate to establish a standardized, dedicated monitoring protocol for graduates for at least one year, linking them immediately with LGUs, NGOs, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for tailored employment support; second, to Modernize the Curriculum and Resources, immediate investment in digital literacy and computer access within BJMP facilities is necessary to bridge the gap between institutional skills and real-world technological demands; and third, to Strengthen Stakeholder Collaboration for Acceptance, policy must be established to encourage Local Government Unit (LGU) and private sector engagement in hiring ALS graduates, potentially through incentives or public awareness campaigns, to directly combat societal stigma and provide genuine opportunity (Samson, 2019).

Conclusion

This study successfully addresses the gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the post-release perspectives of former ALS inmate learners in the Philippines. The central finding demonstrates that while the ALS program is a profound internal catalyst—instilling confidence, correcting educational deficits, and providing certified skills—its long-term efficacy is ultimately weakened by the lack of institutional follow-up and the pervasive societal stigma that persists upon re-entry. The educational transformation that occurs within the correctional facility is effectively neutralized by the system's failure to provide a stable, supportive link to the outside world. To maximize the significant investment in ALS, policymakers must shift focus from simply providing education to mandating sustained post-release support and actively campaigning against community and employer prejudice. Only through a holistic, society-wide approach that validates the educational achievements of former inmates will ALS realize its full potential as a true tool for successful social reintegration.

Recommendations

The profound educational transformation achieved by the Alternative Learning System (ALS) within correctional facilities, which successfully instills confidence, remedies educational gaps, and provides certified skills, is currently being nullified by the absence of mandated institutional follow-up and the pervasive societal stigma faced by former inmate learners upon re-entry. To maximize the significant public investment in this program and ensure its full potential as a tool for successful social reintegration, policymakers must immediately shift focus from mere educational provision to mandating a holistic post-release support system. This system requires establishing a formal "hand-off" protocol for a case manager to provide sustained, one-year support for housing and employment, alongside a high-visibility, government-led public campaign to actively dismantle community and employer prejudice, thereby validating the educational achievements of former inmates and creating a stable, supportive link to the outside world.

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