
Lived Experiences of ALS Teachers in the Fourth District of Iloilo

Jehcel L. Balayo, Ph. D

Teacher Anilao Central School District of Anilao Anilao, Iloilo, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in the Fourth District of Iloilo using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. ALS teachers operate in complex and resource-limited non-formal education settings where they assume multiple roles beyond instruction, including community engagement, learner support, and coordination with stakeholders. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, the study generated rich narrative data that were analyzed using thematic interpretation. Findings revealed five essential themes of coping and resilience: (1) resilience rooted in a strong sense of calling and moral purpose, (2) learner-centered empathy as an emotional coping mechanism, (3) adaptive coping through experiential learning and acceptance of non-traditional teaching roles, (4) professional growth through reflective practice and innovation in constrained environments, and (5) hope-driven resilience anchored in belief in learners' second chances and transformation. The results show that ALS teachers' resilience is multidimensional, shaped by purpose, relational engagement, adaptation, continuous learning, and future-oriented hope. The study concludes that resilience in ALS is not only an individual trait, but a lived, evolving process embedded in the realities of non-formal education. These insights highlight the need for strengthened institutional support, professional development, and psychosocial interventions to sustain ALS teachers' well-being and effectiveness.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System (ALS); lived experiences; hermeneutic phenomenology; teacher resilience; coping strategies; non-formal education; Iloilo Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) is the Philippines' primary non-formal education program designed to provide flexible and inclusive learning opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults who are unable to access or complete formal basic education. As a second-chance education pathway aligned with the K to 12 curriculum and the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) system, ALS plays a vital role in advancing educational equity by enabling marginalized learners to complete basic education outside the traditional classroom setting. Recent reforms under ALS 2.0 and related Department of Education policies, including the establishment of the Bureau of Alternative Education, have strengthened the program's curriculum, delivery modalities, assessment systems, and teacher capacity development, reflecting ongoing national efforts to improve learning recovery and inclusivity in basic education (Department of Education, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Despite these policy enhancements, ALS implementation continues to face persistent structural and contextual challenges. ALS teachers operate in complex, resource-constrained, and geographically dispersed environments where they perform multiple roles beyond instruction, including learner recruitment, community engagement, profiling, and coordination with local stakeholders. These multidimensional responsibilities often require significant emotional, physical, and professional effort, particularly in underserved communities where access to learning resources and institutional support remains limited (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2022). In the Fourth District of Iloilo, ALS implementation is generally regarded as functional; however, variations in learner participation, completion rates, and logistical support highlight uneven program experiences across municipalities (EDCOM II, 2023).

Within this context, the lived experiences of ALS teachers become particularly significant as they navigate overlapping roles, limited resources, and diverse community conditions. Their everyday experiences offer deeper insights into how ALS is implemented at the ground level and how teachers construct meaning around their professional identities within non-formal education settings. Rather than focusing solely on program outputs and policy intentions, examining teachers' lived experiences provides a more nuanced understanding of the realities of ALS implementation as experienced by its frontline educators (OECD, 2020).

Anchored in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study seeks to explore and interpret the lived experiences of ALS teachers in the Fourth District of Iloilo. It aims to generate an in-depth understanding of how teachers experience, interpret, and give meaning to their roles in the ALS context, thereby contributing to more responsive, context-sensitive, and human-centered insights for strengthening alternative education practice in the Philippines.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) teachers in the Fourth District of Iloilo, Philippines. This approach is grounded in the philosophy of Heidegger, which emphasizes interpreting how individuals make meaning of their lived realities within specific social and professional contexts. Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it seeks not only to describe experiences but also to interpret the meanings embedded in ALS teachers' day-to-day professional lives.

The study was conducted in selected public schools within the Fourth District of Iloilo where ALS programs are actively implemented. Participants were ALS teachers who have direct involvement in facilitating learning sessions for out-of-school youth and adult learners. A purposive sampling technique was used to select information-rich participants who could provide in-depth accounts of their lived experiences in ALS teaching.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to freely narrate their experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and reflections as ALS educators. Follow-up questions were used to clarify and deepen responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis consistent with hermeneutic interpretation, where significant statements were identified, coded, and organized into emerging themes. The researcher engaged in iterative reading of transcripts to interpret meanings within context, moving between parts of the text and the whole narrative to generate a deeper understanding of ALS teachers' lived experiences.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies. Member checking was conducted by returning summaries of interpretations to participants for validation. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and secure data handling throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Coping Strategies and Resilience Mechanisms of ALS Teachers

Analysis of the narratives revealed five essential themes describing the lived experiences of ALS teachers in coping with challenges and sustaining resilience in the Fourth District of Iloilo.

Theme 1: Resilience Rooted in Sense of Calling and Purpose

ALS teachers consistently described their work as a calling rather than mere employment. This sense of moral purpose enabled them to persist despite heavy workloads and limited resources. The vocational meaning attached to teaching reflects intrinsic motivation, where professional commitment is sustained by personal

values and purpose rather than external rewards. Similar findings emphasize that teacher resilience is strengthened when work is grounded in meaning and moral commitment (Day et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A participant expressed this clearly: *“Being an ALS teacher is truly my calling”* (T6).

Theme 2: Learner-Centered Empathy as Coping

Teachers emphasized that understanding learners’ struggles helped them remain motivated and emotionally stable in difficult teaching contexts. Empathy transformed emotional strain into commitment, reinforcing the idea that relational engagement is central to teacher resilience in marginalized settings. Research shows that emotional connection with learners enhances teachers’ capacity to sustain effort and commitment in challenging environments (Gu & Day, 2013). This was reflected in the statement: *“Understanding my learners’ needs... being patient and encouraging”* (T2).

Theme 3: Adaptive Coping Through Embracing a Non-Traditional Path

Many teachers initially experienced fear and uncertainty upon entering ALS but gradually developed confidence through lived experience. This transition reflects experiential learning, where understanding and competence emerge through reflection on practice and adaptation to real-world challenges (Kolb, 1984). Teachers’ movement from fear to acceptance demonstrates resilience as a dynamic and evolving process shaped by experience.

Theme 4: Professional Growth as Coping Strategy

viewed ALS as a space for continuous learning, innovation, and professional development. Challenges were reframed as opportunities to improve instructional practice and adapt to diverse learner needs. This aligns with research on teacher professional learning, which highlights that continuous reflective practice strengthens competence and adaptability (Desimone & Garet, 2015). One respondent noted, *“Teaching adults... inspired me”* (T7), illustrating professional transformation through experience.

Theme 5: Hope-Driven Resilience

Hope emerged as a central mechanism sustaining teachers’ perseverance. Teachers were motivated by the belief that ALS provides second chances and transformative opportunities for learners. Hope functions as a future-oriented cognitive process that strengthens persistence and resilience in difficult conditions (Snyder, 2002). This was reflected in the statement: *“I wanted to give them second chances”* (T1).

Personal and Professional Meanings of ALS Work

Theme 1: ALS Teaching as Life-Changing Work

Teachers viewed ALS as transformative, extending beyond academic instruction to changing learners’ life trajectories. This reflects humanistic education perspectives, where teaching is seen as facilitating holistic development and life transformation (Noddings, 2013). One teacher stated: *“Changing the way of life of someone is better than just helping them pass an exam”* (T1).

Theme 2: Fulfillment in Learners’ Progress

Teachers derived fulfillment from small but meaningful learner achievements, reinforcing motivation and professional identity. Research shows that recognition of incremental progress enhances teacher engagement and satisfaction (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This was expressed as: *“Every small improvement feels like a victory”* (T3).

Theme 3: Teaching as Compassion and Sacrifice

ALS teaching was described as emotionally and physically demanding, often requiring personal sacrifice and deep relational care. This reflects the concept of emotional labor in teaching, where educators invest personal resources in supporting learner well-being (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). A teacher shared a lived example of assisting a learner during an exam (T10), illustrating embodied compassion in practice.

Theme 4: Personal Transformation

Teachers experienced personal growth in patience, empathy, and self-awareness through their ALS engagement. This aligns with transformative learning theory, which posits that professional experiences can reshape identity and worldview (Mezirow, 1997). One teacher reflected: *“This journey made me realize how deeply connected personal and professional life truly are”* (T4).

Theme 5: Hope and Moral Responsibility

Hope and moral responsibility were central to how teachers interpreted their work, emphasizing belief in second chances and human potential. Hope theory suggests that goal-directed thinking and perceived pathways to improvement sustain motivation and resilience (Snyder, 2002). This was expressed in: *“Giving hope to learners who are left behind is worth it”* (T9).

DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of ALS teachers reveal resilience as a multidimensional phenomenon anchored in purpose, empathy, adaptation, professional growth, and hope. Teachers consistently expressed a strong sense of calling, viewing their work not merely as employment but as a meaningful vocation rooted in service to marginalized learners. This sense of purpose sustains their commitment even in the face of heavy workloads, limited resources, and challenging learning environments. Their narratives show that meaning making is central to their persistence in the Alternative Learning System.

Empathy toward learners emerged as a core coping mechanism. Teachers consistently drew emotional strength from understanding the difficult realities of their learners, including poverty, work-related responsibilities, and lack of family support. Rather than becoming discouraged, teachers transformed these struggles into motivation to persist and provide patient, flexible, and compassionate instruction. This emotional connection with learners reinforces their commitment and helps them sustain engagement in demanding teaching contexts.

Adaptive coping was also evident in how teachers initially struggled with uncertainty, fear, and hesitation upon entering ALS, but gradually developed confidence through experience. Over time, they learned to navigate non-traditional teaching environments, accept role flexibility, and adjust to resource constraints. This transition reflects resilience as an evolving process shaped by lived experience, where challenges become opportunities for adjustment and learning.

Professional growth further emerged as a deliberate coping strategy. Teachers described ALS as a space that pushed them to innovate, reflect, and continuously improve their teaching practices. The constraints of the program encouraged creativity and flexibility, allowing them to develop new instructional approaches suited to diverse learner needs. In this way, professional challenges were reframed as opportunities for development rather than limitations.

Finally, hope stood out as the most sustaining force in teachers’ lived experiences. Teachers consistently expressed belief in the possibility of second chances and positive transformation for their learners. This future-oriented mindset helped them endure emotional and structural difficulties, as they remained focused on the long-term impact of their efforts. Hope functioned as an anchor that reinforced their perseverance, emotional strength, and commitment to inclusive education.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and discussion of the lived experiences of ALS teachers in the Fourth District of Iloilo, several conclusions are drawn.

First, ALS teachers demonstrate that resilience is strongly anchored in a deep sense of calling and moral purpose. Their commitment to teaching is not driven primarily by external rewards but by an internalized belief in service and meaningful contribution to marginalized learners. This sense of vocation sustains their persistence despite structural and contextual challenges in the Alternative Learning System.

Second, empathy toward learners plays a central role in how ALS teachers cope with daily challenges. Their ability to understand and emotionally connect with learners' difficult life situations allows them to transform stress into motivation. This learner-centered orientation strengthens their commitment and reinforces their capacity to sustain inclusive and compassionate teaching practices.

Third, ALS teachers experience resilience as a developmental and adaptive process. Initial fear, uncertainty, and hesitation gradually evolve into confidence and competence through lived experience. This indicates that resilience in ALS is not fixed but continuously shaped by exposure, reflection, and engagement in non-traditional teaching environments.

Fourth, professional growth is a key coping strategy that enables teachers to reframe challenges as opportunities for learning and innovation. The constraints of ALS serve as catalysts for creativity, reflective practice, and instructional flexibility, contributing to continuous professional development and improved teaching effectiveness.

Finally, hope emerges as the strongest sustaining force in ALS teachers' lived experiences. Their belief in second chances and the transformative potential of education enables them to endure emotional, physical, and structural difficulties. Hope functions as a stabilizing foundation that supports perseverance, strengthens emotional resilience, and reinforces their long-term commitment to inclusive education.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct, analysis, and publication of this study.

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