STANDPOINTS OF LEARNERS OF THE ADULT LEARNING SYSTEM: A PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract-The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in their pursuit to education, their coping mechanisms on the challenges in their educational pursuit and their dreams and aspirations in life. Phenomenological approach was utilized with 26 ALS learners from different ALS centers of the Department of Education-Division of Sarangani, Philippines for School Year 2015-2016 were picked to undergo in depth interview and focused group discussion. The results of the interview were transcribed, translated and coded to produce themes. As regards to ALS learners' experiences in their pursuit to education, the following were the themes: initiation to system, implication to system, impetus and motivation, pleasures, inadequacies and inconveniences. As to their challenges in their educational pursuit, the themes that emerged were: industry, conscientiousness, optimism and positivity. As to their insights, the themes were generated: gainful employment, sense of accomplishment, and progress and self-improvement.

Keywords

Standpoints. It is a position from which object and principles are viewed according to which they are compared and judged.

Alternative Learning System (ALS). It is a ladderized, modular non-formal education program in the Philippines for dropouts in elementary and secondary schools, out-of-school youths, non-readers, working Filipinos and even senior citizens. It is part of the education system of the Philippines but an alternative to the regular classroom studies where Filipino students are required to attend daily.

Phenomenology. It refers to a kind of qualitative research which is concerned with the study of phenomena actually experienced by ALS learners.

Common Challenges. It is something needing great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully, or the situation of facing this kind of effort.

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Introduction

Many uneducated adults in today's era seek education to conform themselves on what the society presently demands from them especially in the line of employment. Mostly, they are those drop-outs from formal schools, deprived of education due to poverty, those who suffered from severe illnesses in their younger age or those living in communities far from schools. Adults that are faced with any of the aforementioned

factors may find themselves in a position where they require education to advance in seeking job opportunities or a more stable disposition.

In Sarangani Province where many identified uneducated adults and Out of School Youth (OSY) inclusive in the municipality of Alabel, Malapatan, Malungon, Glan, and Maasim, unemployment and poverty sprout like mushrooms. The only way to diminish these factors is through the exercise of the right to free basic education.

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) which provides all Filipinos the chance to have access to complete basic education in a mode that fits their distinct situations and needs is creating an impact in the lives of the depressed communities.

The study of Merriam (2007), mentioned that this kind of education is a practice in which adults or out of school youth engage in systematic and sustained self-educating activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values. It can mean any form of learning that adults engage in beyond traditional schooling, encompassing basic literacy to personal fulfillment as a lifelong learner.

In particular, this kind of education reflects a specific philosophy about learning and teaching based on the assumption that adults can and want to learn, that they are able and willing to take responsibility for that learning, and that the learning itself should respond to their needs.

Seeing a vast opportunities for adult learners, the scrutiny of their experiences and needs would lead to measure the degree of motivation, the level of engagement in the learning process in adult education, and how the learning has impact their lives would be brought to open. Each adult has unique preconceived thoughts and feelings influenced by environmental, social and personal factors. Thus, assessing these traits, knowing motivations to learning and identifying the barriers in pursuing adult education would give the concerned people an information which would enhance or modify the delivery of alternative education to the clienteles.

As assigned personnel in Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Division of Sarangani with my co-author, we were in the utmost position to ensure that free education is afforded to target learners. Hence, we were motivated to trace the outcome of our efforts advocating the said program. We were interested to find out the experiences and success stories of our ALS learners.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of the Adult learners in their schooling. This study involves the Alternative Learning System learners in under Department of Education, Province of Sarangani, with the intent of gaining a clearer understanding of the ALS standpoints.

This study envisioned to document the significant experiences of the Adult learners under Alternative Learning System of Department of Education in the province of Sarangani. In this study, we intended to watch, listen and grasp the untold stories of these adult learners on how they managed to survive the challenges they faced during their schooling, how they reached their present status, and the insights they shared with their experiences.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of ALS learners in their pursuit to education?

2. What are the coping mechanisms to succeed in the ALS program?

3. What are their dreams and aspirations in life?

METHODOLOGY

Presented in this section are the nature of the study, the research design used with regard to presentation, analysis and interpretation, the philosophical assumptions, role of the researcher, research participants, the data collection process,, data analysis, trustworthiness which includes the following: credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability of the study and all individuals involved and the ethical considerations in the process.

Research Design

In this research study, we employed descriptive qualitative method particularly phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of human perception of events or phenomena from the actual happenings in the real world. It is reliving the experiences of the participants involved in the study and going deeper into their thoughts, identifying the essence of the experience as described by the participants, through lengthy discussions (Campbell, 2011; Creswell 2007; Speziale and Carpenter, 2007; Willis, 2007).

We utilized the phenomenological approach because it is a powerful tool in getting a clear understanding of human experiences, penetrating into their thoughts, feelings and actions in order to gain insights from their experiences. It clearly illustrates the specific details of the experiences and how they are seen by the subjects in the situation. It is an appropriate instrument in my study wherein I needed to envision and explore the actual experiences of my participants.

In phenomenological research, the use of bracketing was applied to minimize presuppositions to prevent potential harmful effects of presumptions that may affect the research process, thereby improving the precision of the research study. The researcher must be vigilant at all times, aware of his/her own views and the pre-existing beliefs on the study, must learn to set aside his/her own a-priori knowledge and experiences to fully capture the experiences being told by the participants with an open mind (Starks and Trinidad, 2007; Taylor, 2012; Taylor and Francis, 2012; Tufford and Newman, 2010). In conducting this qualitative study, I am interested to know how things happened and how people interpret their experiences and how they find meaning to these experiences (Meriam, 2009).

Through phenomenological reduction, the researcher simply reduced the realm from how it is perceived naturally, with all biases and judgment to realm of pure phenomena (Dowling, 2007). Thus, the essence of the phenomena is allowed to surface. In addtition, the participants' own words were used throughout the process of data analysis and phenomenological description. The process of bracketing was employed throughout the course of the study. The method examined and scrutinized the phenomena through the subjective eyes of the participants, focusing on subjectivity of reality and continually pointing out the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them, and on the process, the researcher set aside his personal experiences and opinion to fully grasp the experiences of the participants, identifying its essence (Creswell, 2007).

Nonetheless, sources of qualitative data included interviews, observations and documents (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Locke et al, 2010; Suter, 2012) emphasizing two ways of collecting data if one wanted information about the lived experience of a phenomenon from another person, the traditional face to face interview and the written account of the experience, both could not be broken down easily by a statistical software. In our study, We used specific methodologies such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and note-taking, giving much attention to details and importance of the emotional content to open up an array of human experiences of the subjects involved in the study. What one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through (Giorgi, 2009).

In using a descriptive phenomenological approach, preconceptions about the ALS students' experiences were documented prior to the onset of the study and were compared to what had transpired and observed during the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The preconceptions, beliefs, and findings of the researcher were revealed unambiguously in the research report. The researcher observed flexibility and openness which were connected with having learned to maintain a fair amount of ambiguity (Strauss and Corbin, 2008) in order to have a useful and positive output.

In our research study, we classified themes of the phenomena with 11 informants for in-depth interviews and 15 participants for focused group discussion. In qualitative

research such as phenomenology, it is recommended that for in-depth interviews, researchers could interview 5-25 participants who had experienced the same phenomenon, if one would want to achieve the goal of representatives and generalizability as a criterion, from a small number of research participants (Creswell, 2006; Giorgi, 2009; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009),. Nevertheless, sample sizes of 10-25 are adequate provided participants are able to provide rich descriptions of the phenomena (Speziale and Carpenter, 2007). Moreover, Hancock et al (2009) further stated that focus groups are considered to work quite well with approximately eight people.

Role of the Researcher

The Department of Education aims to provide education to all citizens of the country through the Alternative Learning Program. Its main priority is the Out-of-School youth and the adult learners. However, based on conducted surveys, there are still more identified adults who are willing to educate themselves and pursue their studies to achieve their dreams and aspirations in life. It is for this reason that we undertook this study to find out the experiences of ALS learners in their pursuit of education, their coping mechanism to succeed in the ALS program, and to listen their successful stories.

Since this study has a personal meaning for us being one of the in-charge of ALS program in our Division and with the co-authors' intention to be an agent of change , we personally gathered the data through the help of all District ALS coordinators and mobile teachers in the Municipalities of Alabel, Malapatan, Glan, Malungon, and Maasim.

We conducted the focused group discussion with all the fifteen informants in which five for Basic Literacy, five for Accreditation and Equivalency for Elementary and five (5) for Accreditation and Equivalency for Secondary. Another Ten (10) participants for the in depth interview.

Furthermore, we sought the assistance from another independent readers and analyst. The three of us analyzed the data gathered from the audio recordings of the interviews and Focal Group Discussion. After coming up with the same findings, we employed the expertise of a professional data analyst for data analysis and interpretation and thereafter, then we came up with personal insights.

Research Participants

Before the conduct of our study, we identified some of the informants through the help of our District ALS Coordinators and mobile teachers in the five (5) municipalities of Sarangani Province. The identified informants are our learners in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Program. We chose them through purposive sampling as my

participants based on pre-selected criteria relevant to the research study (Richards and Morse, 2006).

After identifying these prospects and explaining to them the purpose of the study, all of them happily agreed to participate. They willingly shared their experiences in their pursuit of education as ALS learners. They also expressed their desire to be interviewed anytime for the completion of this study.

To obtain a good quality of qualitative research, we opted to get just a considerable number of participants for my research with ten informants for the in-depth interviews and fifteen participants to engage in focused group discussions. Focus groups are considered to work well with approximately ten people (Hancock et al, 2009). We believed that this was already a considerable number of participants, adequate to give credible information and significant results and findings.

Moreover, Creswell (2006) recommended that researchers could adopt 5-25 individuals who had experienced the same phenomenon for in-depth interviews. Relative to this, Englander (2012) stated that, in qualitative research, the researcher pursues knowledge by deeply penetrating to the core of the experience, to seek the essence of a phenomenon, not how many people who have experienced such phenomena. Furthermore, central figures in the development of psychology such as Freud, Piaget and Skinner developed their theories based on research, involving only a minimal number of subjects and without depending on statistical analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

Before the actual interviews, we arranged a preliminary meeting with the participants and informants, had a little chat with them to gain their trust and confidence, as well as developed camaraderie. This was also an opportunity for me to explain the purpose of the study, the importance of their role in the outcome of the research study, addressed their questions, concerns, review some ethical considerations and complete the consent forms. This was also a good chance to review the research questions with the participants. In this way, they would have time to ponder on their experiences before the actual in-depth interview. This was very important in doing a qualitative research because the establishment of a god level of rapport and empathy is to developing a positive relationship during in-depth interviews and consequently, gaining depth of information, particularly where investigating issues where the participant had a personal stake (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).We further emphasized that this study may possibly bring difference in the lives of the adult learners in their pursuit of education.

Data Collection

In the collection of data of the study, we underwent these processes namely: interviewing in-depth with the study-informants, conducting focus group discussion with the participants and note-taking.

Before conducting the actual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the study participants, we ensured that the ethical considerations were properly observed. We applied the key principles of ethical issues (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Bricki and Green, 2007; Kaiser, 2009; Mack et al, 2005) that should be considered in any research study which are consent and confidentiality.

In-depth interview is one approach that was undertaken in order to gather information from the study informants. The in-depth interview is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the research topic (Mack et al, 2005). It is more than just an approach to understand the participant's experiences but it is going deeper into their thoughts and behavior, listening to their inner voice to explore new issues. Focus groups resemble interviews, but in focus group discussions, both the strengths and the weaknesses of focus groups flow directly from their two defining features: the dependence on the researcher's focus and the group's interaction (Morgan, 2013).

In the process of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we asked the help of a colleague to do the note-taking while we facilitated the interviews. During the interviews, there might have been instances that certain details were not adequately expressed or even missed out because the informants were not that articulate or well-equipped in communicating with people. This might have created misconception and ambiguity. To avoid this, we always repeated the question, if necessary (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) and confirmed with my informants their answers to the questions, to ensure that we were able to grasp correctly the information they provided. In every instance, we need to be flexible and be able to adjust to the moods of my interviewees. To ensure that all information was documented thoroughly, making sure that no important detail was missed out, note-taking was applied (Mack et al, 2005; Penner and Mc Clement, 2008).

Data were collected through audio recordings of interviews since audio or video recording improves the accuracy of the content shared in the focus group or in-depth interview, as well as the speaker's intonations (InSites, 2007) with the participants in a private setting either in their respective homes or private offices or another neutral site such as a quiet coffee shop or private room. This audio recording of the interview were transcribed verbatim and checked by the participants for confirmation if everything was taken as it is.

Confidentiality was observed in all sessions and with all informants (Bricki and Green, 2007), consistently addressing them by their pseudonyms to conceal their real identity. To have a continuous flow during the in-depth interview, we prepared our open ended research questions as indicated in the interview guide but also inform them that there could be additional questions not in the interview guide that we might think necessary in providing helpful insights to the study. This also promoted trust and openness with our participants.

Analysis of Data

Analysis of data in research study involves summarizing the mass of data collected and presenting the results in a way that communicates the most important features (Hancock et al, 2007). Data were analyzed using a method which included data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification (Zhang and Widemuth, 2007), adding the qualitative content analysis is any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.

Data reduction is the abstraction of data from the transcriptions, deleting data which are not important and transforming it into a comprehensible material, easily understood by many (Namey et al, 2007; Paul, 2006; Suter, 2012). This pairing and sieving of data is often termed as thematic analysis, a form of sorting and categorizing. With data reduction, We employed the expertise of a professional data analyst for data analysis. Data display on the other hand is the organization of data and showing it in the form of graphic organizers such as matrices, charts, graphs, that would enable the viewer to draw his conclusion (Suter, 2012).

Conclusion drawing and verification was the last step of qualitative analysis. It involves going back to consider what the analyzed data mean and to assess their aftermaths for the questions at hand while verification, integrally linked to conclusion drawing, required revisiting the data as many times as necessary to cross-check or verify the emergent conclusions (Paul, 2006.

Trustworthiness.

To establish the trustworthiness of the study, We observed its four components. These are the following: credibility, conformability, transferability and dependability.

Credibility. To establish the credibility of our study, we ensured that rigor was properly observed during the data collection especially during the interviews, wherein we avoided drawing conclusions from the interviews but based everything on factual data, directly from the participants.

Conformability. To address the conformability of our study, we set aside our personal opinions, assumptions and judgments in order to guard against distortion of data. The use of audio-taped interviews, note-taking and journals we kept throughout the study is one way of ensuring conformability.

Transferability. To address transferability, we described in detail the research context and the assumptions that were the central to the research and showed all data as transparent as possible.

Dependability. To establish the dependability of our study, we ensured consistency during the data collection and analysis by doing the code-recode system during the data reduction and applied the peer examination and investigator triangulation of the data collected and analyzed. This made the study reliable.

Ethical Consideration

Since my research study involved ALS learners, they were hesitant to disclose information out of fear and withheld some data. However, as part of research rigor, several safeguards were applied that erased their fears and promoted trust. I ensure that my study was guided by ethical principles as described by (Mack et al, 2005), namely: respect for persons, beneficence, justice, consent and confidentiality.

Results

Presented in this chapter are the experiences of the study participants, their insights and discernments as well the concepts which emerged from the information gleaned through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. The following research questions made possible the production of data from the informants.

1. What are the experiences of ALS Learners in their pursuit to education?

2. How do the ALS learners cope the challenges in their educational pursuit?

3. What are their dreams and aspirations in life?

Table 1

Themes and Thematic Statements on the Experiences of ALS learners in their Pursuit to Education

ESSENTIAL THEMES	THEMATIC STATEMENTS
Initiation to the System	Was convinced by mother to go to Alternative Learning System
	It was my wife influenced me to enroll in ALS
	Friends and neighbors persuaded me to enroll in ALS
Impetus and Motivation	I want to learn something; don't want to be called ignorant
	To augment whatever was lacking in my previous education
	Enrolling in ALS will help me improve myself
	So that I will learn how to read and write
	So that I can go wherever I want to go
	To prove that I can do it
	I was challenged that I won't finish
Pleasure	I am enjoying school with my classmates
	Having fun with my classmates and friends
	I like listening to teacher; learning things from them
Inadequacies and Inconveniences	My time is limited; need to attend to my family's needs
	I would arrive late in school.
	There are many tasks to do at home.
	Have no time to read and study my lessons.
	No electric fan in the classroom.
	I have no books and school supplies
	Sometimes difficult because we are very in the farm
	Lack of concentration because of house chores
	School materials are solely lacking i.e books, ID, Pencil, ball pen and uniform

Table 2

Themes and Thematic Statements on How ALS Learners Cope with Challenges in their Educational Pursuit

ESSENTIAL THEMES	THEMATIC STATEMENTS
Industry	Try to speed up work at home so I can attend school
	I maximize the time.
	I study while the kids are asleep.
	I study at night when all work is done.
Conscientiousness	I try to attend classes always so I can understand the lessons
	I prepare myself for my classes
	I listen well to the teacher
	I pay attention to the class discussion
	I read my notes whenever I have time
	Making good in my studies
Optimism and Positivity	I will proceed to College after ALS
	I will save enough money to finance further studies
	I dream about a good future with my family
	I will encourage others to enroll in ALS

Table 3

Themes and Thematic Statements on the Dreams and Aspirations of ALS Learners

ESSENTIAL THEMES	THEMATIC STATEMENTS
Gainful Employment	That I will find myself a better job after passing ALS
	To find myself a stable work someday
	To increase my chances of finding a job
	My diploma will help me find a good paying work.
	That I can help in my family finances.
Sense of Accomplishment	That I will be successful in my educational endeavor
Progress and Self-improvement	To finish a course.
	To realize my dreams.
	To receive a college diploma someday.
	I can teach my kids someday when they ask help with their assignment
	To feel more confident about myself
	ALS will deliver me out ignorance
	That I will not work in the farm anymore
	That I will no longer be "uling-maker"
	That I can acquire a house for myself and my family

Chapter Summary

From the results of this study, the following issues were identified.

On the issues related to the experiences of ALS learners and their pursuit to education, it indicated that there were four major themes that appeared which were related to initiation to system, implication to system, impetus and motivation, pleasures, inadequacies and inconveniences, most of the participants were motivated to learn because they did not want to be called ignorant, they like to listen to their teachers and learn things from them.

On the issues related to how the participants respond about the coping mechanism with Challenges in their Educational Pursuit, there were five (5) major themes that serves as the rout codes to represent responses they gave. These major themes were namely: industry, conscientiousness, optimism and positivity. Majority of the participants, responded that they balance their work, family responsibilities, chores and studies, and tried to prepare their self to attend classes always so that they can understand the lessons because they want to proceed to college and dream about good future of their family.

Lastly, on the issues related to the dreams and aspirations in life of the ALS learners there were three (3) major themes that appeared where ideas were highly related to Gainful Employment, Sense of Accomplishment, and Progress and Self-improvement. The participants responded that they wanted to finish studies to gain stable employment, to have a diploma and pursued their education through ALS to gain knowledge and life skills.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, the following implications for practice are offered:

On Handling the Problems of ALS Learners. The experience of the ALS learners reflected in this study showed their financial and material needs. The DepEd authorities, LGU officials and concerned individuals could use the data from the ALS coordinator to address the immediate needs of the adult learners in order to assure increased number of A & E passers as it is a must for the learners to pass the equivalency test to move further in their pursuit of education and usher them to further skills and development training program relevant for their living.

On the Interest of the Adult Learners to ALS program. In view of the reported dedication and perseverance of the ALS learners to the program, it has been established that their interest was high. It is the real representation of the poor who wanted to see change in their economic status. Thus, it was also found out that none of them wanted to quit because of inconveniencies and challenges. For this reason, it would be beneficial to provide these students necessary attention to ensure high turn

outs in the A & E test by providing them aids in learning and other related and relevant activities.

On the Upholding the ALS program. Since the study have established the problems encountered by the ALS learners and since the efficacy and impact of the program was already been laid, the DepEd authorities could tap local government units to give assistance to the ALS learners in their community to further continue their pursuit to education.

Implications for Future Research

In as much *as* the standpoint of learners of the adult learning system from Sarangani Province was established in this study, the following implication for future research may be done:

Since the phenomenological study presents evidences about the informants' satisfactory experience on the Alternative Learning System, a study that deals on the parameters of the ALS teachers that highlights their personal experiences and challenges face in implementing the ALS program in the far flung schools may be useful and coherent to this purpose so as to see the program from different perspective.

A future research that concentrates on the livelihood, education or work affiliation of the Accreditation & Equivalency passers could be conducted so as to trace the appropriateness of the program to the skills of the ALS graduates and track the ALS graduates' career and decisions.

The findings of this study were viewed from the lens of the adult ALS learners, thus another research that makes school leavers as respondents would be very beneficial.

Concluding Remarks

The investigation on the experiences of ALS learners in Sarangani has highlighted the significance and importance of the study. The results mentioned in this study of Mercado (2011) substantiated that there are challenges in adult education. This study provides the phenomenological experience of the learners. It also upheld the assertion of Campbell (2011) that a descriptive qualitative method of research particularly phenomenology is better at bringing to surface the human perception from the actual happenings since through discussions, the participants could relive the essence of their experience.

The two methods were then the inspiration of this study in which the standpoint of the ALS learners in Sarangani related their interest, challenges and inspiration to

continue and finish their pursuit of education. Thus, they have left insights in coping with their challenges by handling and managing their family responsibilities and studying.

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