

Alternative Learning System in Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Philippine Context

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Abstract: Education plays a vital role in the success of the country by influencing the development of an individual and respective families. Providing quality, equitable, and accessible education to every Filipino should be served despite COVID-19 pandemic, one way is through the Department of Education's Alternative Learning System program, a second-chance education program. In the conduct of this study, the researchers used narrative model and FGD. The study is limited only to the information from ALS national level and DLSU (urban setting). In the Philippines, the program has been implemented by the Department of Education since 1984. The program has been offered to the learners in District V of Manila City since 2011. In 2020, there challenges experienced by the learners and program implementers caused by the pandemic. Interrupted and poor internet connection for online classes and limited movements were identified challenges experienced on the national level. While for DLSU ALS, the concerns are about access to stable internet connection, family-shared devices, and change of learners' priorities. The above-mentioned concerns were resolved through several interventions. Moreover, the researchers recommendations for ALS implementation in the post-pandemic.

Keywords: alternative learning system, COVID-19, online learning, second-chance education

Introduction

Education is identified as one of the key factors that would influence the development of an individual, family, and on a larger scale, a country. Education in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) highlights the social impact of every country in its broad measuring of human development and progress. It is a catalyst to

nurturing peace, democracy and economic growth as well as improving health and reducing poverty (United Nations, n.d.). The enforcement of such rights brought about the implementation of the Education for All (EFA) goals and movement which is a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth, and adults. The ultimate aim of EFA is sustainable development. EFA has been integrated side by side with the

implementation of the (former) UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 which highlights Target 2: That by 2015, children everywhere will be able to complete a full course in primary education (United Nations Children's Fund, Save the Children (UK), and Qatar Government, 2010).

Consequently, quality education was recognized as an important tool in achieving the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, hence its pronouncement as SDG 4 – Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019; United Nations, n.d.). One of the specific targets of SDG 4 is to ensure that there is equal access and opportunities in education for all that can contribute to human capital development (e.g., literacy and numeracy skills, technical and vocational skills, and employment opportunities). As explained in the study of Bhardwaj in 2016, education is important as it makes us better citizens, brings confidence to a person, ensures bright future, builds character, teaches time management, and develops values.

The Philippines, through the Department of Education (DepEd) have been contributing to the achievement of SDG 4 targets and gearing towards quality education for all. One of its remarkable contributions is the implementation of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the country. ALS is a second-chance education and a substitute or alternative to formal education. Per DepEd, ALS is an intervention to provide all Filipinos free basic education regardless of the circumstances that can limit them from finishing formal basic education (e.g., school dropout, financial concerns, lack of school facilities, etc.). Classes of ALS are usually community-based blended learning in nature, combination of self-paced and modular-based, and are managed by ALS learning facilitators (Igarashi, Acosta, and Tenazas, 2020; Department of Education, n.d.). One example of ALS in the community is the one being implemented by De La Salle University (DLSU) since 2011. The DLSU ALS is catering the learning needs of out-of-school youth (OSY) and less privileged learners around District V of Manila City.

In general, the implementation of ALS has been progressive since its launched and its historical enrollment from 2016-2019 is in an increasing trend (537,666 learners to 739,872 learners) (The World Bank, 2018; Ciasico, 2019; University of the

Philippines School of Economics Student Council, 2020). However, ALS enrollment went down to 384,027 (as of September 21, 2020) for the academic year 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (University of the Philippines School of Economics Student Council, 2020).

Given the situation, it is best to document the implementation of ALS during the pandemic. As of year 2020, there are limited published documentation concerning the matter. This study generally aims to document ALS in time of pandemic at the national and DLSU level, using primary and secondary data. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the issues and challenges encountered in implementing national and DLSU-level ALS during pandemic (learners' and implementers' perspectives);
2. Identify resolutions and adjustments done to address the issues and challenges; and
3. Provide recommendations for post-pandemic implementation of ALS.

The scope of the study is only limited on the information from ALS national level and DLSU (urban setting). Other local level implementation of ALS was not explored in the study.

Moreover, it is expected that the study results will provide insights to the implementers on the status of ALS in this time of pandemic. Moreover, it can influence the implementers and policy makers on formulation of better strategies on handling ALS during and after the pandemic, with emphasis on distance and blended learning.

Methodology

The methodologies used for the purpose of this study are the narrative model and focus group discussion. Due to limited resources and quarantine measures in place during the conduct of the study, the scope is only limited on the information from ALS national level and DLSU (urban setting). However it is enhanced through observing the Methodological Triangulation. Triangulation as a methodological research technique is supposed to support both: the validation and the competences of research findings (Gibson, 2017). Methodological triangulation is the use of more than one method to investigate a phenomenon (Risjord, Miloney, & Dunbar, 2001). Initially, researchers who use two or

more data resources will achieve more rational outcomes than those who use a single source. This is the basic notion of triangulation (Ashour, 2018). In this study, the researchers use first a Narrative Model, Narrative research is thus the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Richardson, 2002). Data can be in the form of field notes; journal records; interview transcripts; one's own and other's observations; storytelling; letter writing; autobiographical writing; documents such as school and class plans, newsletters, and other texts, such as rules and principles; and pictures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this paper, the researchers form a narrative from the data gathered about the Alternative Learning System from the Department of Education and De La Salle University Manila ALS. The "raw material" for the narratives comes from intermental life experiences and intramental images that are not accessible to direct observation. The individual stories that emerge in texts in the creation of narratives are, however, available for direct observation and interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1988). From the data gathered, this paper explicates the effects of Covid-19 in the whole ALS program at the national and university level. Moreover, to validate the interpretation from those data, the researchers also make use of focus group discussion with the ALS learners of DLSU as responders.

Focus groups are a common qualitative data collection method and are considered an important qualitative health research technique (Morgan, 1997). The researchers particularly asked questions on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to the ALS learners. The group discussion also clarifies the effects of the Department of Education program and the DLSU program for the learners. A number of technologies (i.e., iPads, Twitter, and Telehealth) offer proven examples of data collection methods that are cost-effective, efficient, and employ modern technology (S. D. Scott et al., 2016). And in the Focus Group, the researchers used the zoom app. This enables the researcher to also effectively record the responses.

Results and Discussion

I. ALS at a Glance

The DepEd in the Philippines has been implementing second-chance education since 1984. Per the United Nations Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization-International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training in 2011, second-chance education gives learning opportunities to individuals who were not able to attend school or have not completed school for several reasons. It is also referred to as 'bridging programmes' or 'reintegration programmes'.

Philippines

The 1987 Philippine Constitution mentions education explicitly in three articles namely: Article II, Article XIV, and Article XV. In a nutshell, it says, all Filipinos have a constitutional right to basic education and DepEd is mandated to provide this service to all Filipinos. Through DepEd's Bureau of Nonformal Education, an alternative education system has been implemented since 1984 and was renamed to Bureau of Alternative Learning Systems (BALS) in 2004. ALS is one of the key features of educational reform in the Philippines and is explicitly stated in Republic Act 9155 or The Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001. It puts emphasis on the right of all Filipino citizens to quality basic education which also includes alternative learning system for OSY and adult learners (Republic of the Philippines – Official Gazette, 2004). BALS currently operates in two forms, the Informal Education and Nonformal Education (*see Figure 1*). The Nonformal Education has two components: literacy, and accreditation and equivalency (A&E). Finishing self-directed modules on Life Skills for Work Readiness and Civic Engagement is a requirement before proceeding to learning modules of either components. The literacy component or Basic Literacy Program is a community-based program which aims to develop basic literacy skills (reading, writing, and numeracy) among individuals who cannot read and write. While the A&E component provides elementary and secondary level learning opportunities and awards educational diploma to the learners who will pass the A&E test.

Moreover, ALS Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) focuses on six learning strands, namely: (1) Communication Skills, (2) Scientific and Critical Thinking Skills, (3) Mathematical and Problem-Solving Skills, (4) Life and Career Skills, (5) Understanding the Self and Society, and (6) Digital Citizenship (Republic of the Philippines - Department of Education, n.d.; Republic of the Philippines - Department of Education, 2019; The World Bank, 2016). Individuals who wish to enroll

in the ALS program of DepEd must have a minimum age of 11 years old for elementary level and of 15 years old for secondary level (Beñas, 2015). The ALS enrollment trend for years 2016-2020 reflected in *Table 1* shows progression through the years. It was only halted in 2020, given the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

ALS at De La Salle University

DLSU through its vision-mission empowers the Center for Social Concern and Action (COSCA) to lead its social development agenda through a rationalization and operationalization of a community engagement framework anchored on the Lasallian Guiding Principles (LGP), the Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF) and the Social Engagement (SE) Framework. In COSCA, the formation of the Lasallian Sustainable Development Program (LSDP) is strategic which seeks to implement an institutional community development framework using the SDG as its conceptual framework and/or lens. In this context, DLSU-COSCA operationalizes an SDG Localization of an Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education that also promotes Life Learning opportunities. It primarily uses the DepEd's ALS as a conduit for achieving its goals in relation to SDG. The implementation of ALS becomes the vehicle for the establishment of a localization component called L-ARAL which is an acronym for Lasallian Accessible, Relevant and Alternative Learning. L-ARAL implements a full learning year of ALS A&E Program (Junior High School level) since 2011. The ALS Program that is being implemented by L-ARAL is open for all OSYs and adults mainly from COSCA's partner barangays in Leveriza and in District V of Manila City. Topmost factors influencing enrollment to DLSU ALS are challenges related to finances, academics, and family. On the average, the number of enrolled learners in the DLSU ALS program per year is 50. Despite the high number of enrollees, there is still a percentage of learners who have commitment issues that resulted in a low program completer rate. Technically, the passer rate is directly related to the number of learners who completed the program. Given the circumstances, the program has produced 126 graduates throughout its implementation.

II. ALS in Time of COVID-19 Pandemic

The way people see education and learning in the Philippines changes in year 2020. Some

people say that there should be an academic freeze, and some say the opposite. With that, different institutions and DepEd went into a lot of brainstorming to have a learning continuity plan. There were a lot of changes and transitions and one of these is the shift from face-to-face instructions to full online or blended learning sessions to comply with the health protocols being implemented by the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) and to cope with the impacts of the pandemic.

Issues and Challenges

In this section, the issues and challenges related to the implementation of ALS will be presented. With the current shift to distance learning or online learning, issues and challenges were raised by the parents in the DepEd enrollment survey. Topmost concerns are unstable mobile and internet connection, lack of available gadgets and equipment suitable for distance learning, and insufficient load or data allowance (*see Table 2*) (Department of Education, 2020 as cited in Mateo, 2020).

With regards to the current set-up of the Philippine education system on the national level, it was observed that one of the main challenges was the interrupted and poor internet connections for the online classes (Hernando-Malipot, 2020; Adonis, 2020). Also, it was observed that DepEd still has limited movements and decisions on how to go about with the A&E test this year 2020.

As DLSU implements the ALS Program through COSCA, four major challenges were observed. The first major challenge is that since there is a shift from face-to-face learning modality to full online learning, some of the learners do not have access to stable internet connection. Few days after the announcement of the community quarantine (March 15, 2020), the ALS Instructional Manager (IM) of COSCA conducted a survey on how the learners access the internet. More than half (51.35%) of those who answered the survey are using their mobile data to have internet access and the rest have their own Wi-Fi at home. With a series of conversations with the learners, there were times that they chose not to buy internet load so that they can save money for their food expenses. The second challenge is most of the learners do not have their own devices for learning and are usually using mobile phones of other family members (e.g., parent, sibling, or cousin). As experienced by these learners,

they need to skip synchronous learning sessions since the gadget they are supposed to use was unavailable during class hours. Also, learners are having a hard time finishing their tasks or modules because they are always waiting for the availability of the gadget. The third challenge that was observed during the implementation of the ALS program in time of COVID-19 pandemic is the change in learners' priorities. Some of them were full time learners before but because of the pandemic, they need to start earning money to help their family in terms of finances. Some of them became online sellers, Foodpanda or GrabFood riders, and household helpers. Given the need to allocate time for their work, some learners decided to stop schooling to help their family. Fortunately, some learners were still doing their best to balance work and studies. The last challenge was the uncertainty of the schedule of DepEd's A&E test which all enrolled ALS learners are looking forward to. For year 2020, there is a delay on the implementation of the test due to the pandemic. Despite the delay, learners are continuously preparing for the upcoming A&E test with guidance from the IM and was also assisted by COSCA in learning through online tutorials provided by Service Learning Program.

The issues and challenges experienced at the national level and DLSU ALS were further validated by the learners' perspective and experiences on studying amidst the pandemic. Some of the DLSU-COSCA ALS learners were gathered last February 27, 2021 (almost a year after the pandemic have started) for a Focused Group Discussion (FGD). They were asked questions about their experiences while going through the program amidst the pandemic. One of the highlights during the FGD was when learners shared the challenges they faced while learning during the pandemic. The top three challenges mentioned by the learners were (1) financial concerns due to unemployment, (2) internet connection and gadget problems, and (3) being away from their families. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of their parents became unemployed. With this, some of the learners looked for alternative means of living and became extra cautious in balancing their time for work, study, and family. Learners mentioned that the second challenge was resolved when DLSU-COSCA provided internet load for those learners who are in need and when they distributed tablets from the donations of different DLSU Alumni groups. Moreover, they made sure to communicate via phone call with their respective family members whom

they have not seen since pandemic started. The results of the FGD solidify the need to immediately address the concerns on implementing ALS especially when it comes to internet connection and availability of gadgets for online learning.

Resolutions and Adjustments

On the national level, DepEd is trying to slowly bring back the tradition of having A&E tests yearly. However, 2020 will be different because of the COVID-19 pandemic. To resolve such concern, DepEd released an advisory on October 6, 2020 that there will be computerized A&E test this 2020 for those ALS program completers with ages 21 to 59 only (in accordance with the health protocols) (Republic of the Philippines – Department of Education, 2020). DepEd is trying their best to accommodate and exhaust all possible activities so that ALS learners can finish their education even with the impacts of pandemic.

Moreover, while following the health protocols and results from series of planning and strategizing, DLSU ALS adjusted accordingly. COSCA's ALS IM decided to utilize different online learning platforms to continue the education of the ALS learners. Google Classroom and Zoom applications were adopted to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions. These platforms were chosen because of its user-friendly features. Learners and their guardians were also invited to attend tutorial sessions on how to use the said platforms. After almost two months of adjustments, learners were able to cope in this kind of learning modality. It is also important to note that learners were given a chance to discuss with the ALS IM about the flexibility of class schedule. Given the changes in learning modality, provision of internet load to those learners who are in need was made possible by COSCA after realigning its budget. While for those who do not have gadget/s for online learning, it was resolved by lending them android tablets and iPads. These gadgets were donated by different DLSU alumni groups. These interventions aim to ease the learners' concerns in accomplishing academic tasks and attending synchronous learning sessions.

And to accommodate the learning needs of some learners who have other priorities than academics (e.g., work or family business), learning sessions are done asynchronously. ALS IM uploads learning modules and recorded videos in Google

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classroom where learners can read the modules, watch the videos, and answer the assessment in their available time.

With the adjustments made by DLSU and DepEd, learners expressed their gratitude during the aforementioned FGD. Sebastian (ALS learner) mentioned that “Nabigyan ng pansin ng DepEd para makapag-aral kami [ulit]. Sobra-sobra ang tugon ng DLSU-COSCA, in terms of gadget and load assistance.” Another ALS learner, Annabel, said that “Nagpapasalamat kami sa DLSU kasi binigyan [kami] ng pagkakataon para makapagtapos ng pag-aaral. Nagpapasalamat din [ako] sa DepEd dahil sinusuportahan ang ALS.”

Conclusion

Throughout the study, the researchers have identified several strengths and weaknesses of ALS implementation both at the national and DLSU level, especially in this time of pandemic. In this section, the researchers will also put emphasis on some best practices that can be basis of recommendations for improvement of ALS implementation, specifically in the post pandemic.

The results of the study have shown that the topmost issue on implementing ALS during pandemic is on internet connectivity and availability of gadgets for online learning. Hence, for a better learning environment and quality education, the implementers are encouraged to find creative ways to address the problem. Provision of connectivity support to the learners and IMs is a good move and can motivate everyone to continue online or modular learning despite the challenges. This can also address the decline in number of enrollments during the pandemic.

Along with learnings from the pandemic, it would also be helpful to benchmark and replicate good practices of ALS implementation from pre-pandemic going to post-pandemic. As for DLSU ALS with almost nine years of implementation, one of the best practices is allotting enough time to teach core modules. COSCA also offers an opportunity to the entire Lasallian community to volunteer as teachers. Volunteer teachers were assigned on a specific learning strand and modules based on their field of specialization and education. Another best practice is the collaboration with different student-led organizations in DLSU as well as the Service Learning program to conduct activities that will

develop the learners holistically. Student-led organizations usually conduct career talks, educational tours or field trips, seminars, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT)-related workshops. These activities help the learners in developing different skills such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, and other work-related skills. While the Service Learning program conducted online tutorials in Mathematics and accounting subjects (this is maximized during the pandemic).

Given the issues and challenges, and together with the resolutions done and best practices from pre-pandemic, the researchers would like to recommend to other implementers of the ALS program to include the community in the learning process of the learners. Program implementers should not be limited to enhancing learners' knowledge but also improving other skills. That is why collaboration and partnership with different institutions, organizations, and stakeholders are highly encouraged to develop the learners holistically. Another recommendation is that implementers should be more resourceful and critical thinkers in implementing the program since knowledge can now be easily accessed through the internet. More importantly, implementers and facilitators should always guide the learners and teach them honesty to check and observe their own learning progress.

For academic institutions, the researchers would like to recommend the inclusion of the ALS Program (or nonformal education) in the curriculum of education-related courses. This recommendation was mentioned to equip future educators/teachers and instructional managers of ALS program with knowledge and skills intended for the nonformal education.

Moreover, to strengthen ALS implementation in the post-pandemic, it would be beneficial if the national government would invest in a unique Learning Management System (LMS) to better facilitate the experience of the ALS learners. Consistent support should also be given to ALS IMs and facilitators in terms of enhancing their skills for online teaching.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1. *ALS program structure*

Source: Republic of the Philippines - Department of Education, 2019

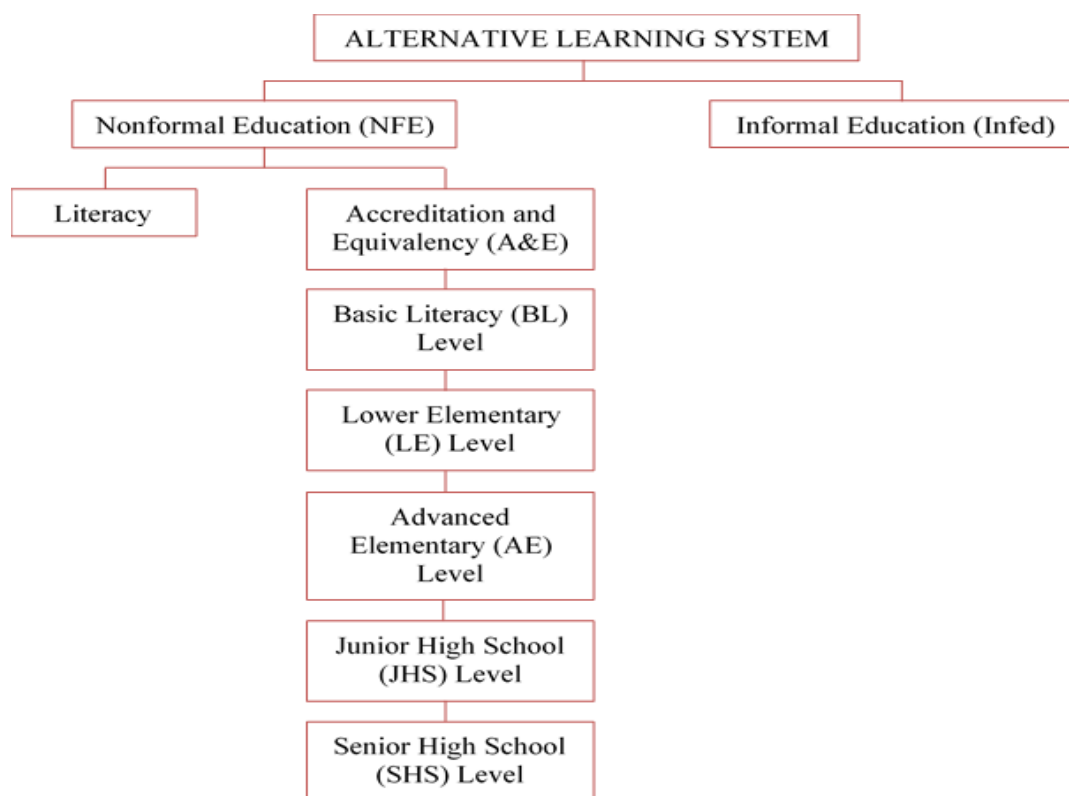


Table 1. ALS Trend of Enrollment, Year 2016-2020

School Year	Number of Enrollees	Percentage Difference (%)
2016-2017	537,666	-
2017-2018	641,584	19.33
2018-2019	823,013	28.28
2019-2020	739,872	-10.10
2020-2021 (as of September 21)	384,027	-48.09

Sources: The World Bank, 2018; Ciasico, 2019; University of the Philippines School of Economics Student Council, 2020

Table 2. Primary concerns raised by parents in relation to distance learning

Number of Respondents (in million)	Concerns
6.9	unstable mobile and internet connections
6.8	lack of available gadgets and equipment
6.2	insufficient load or data allowance
2.5	difficulty in independent learning
2.3	distractions such as social media and noise from community
1.7	conflict with other activities
0.838	lack of available space for studying
0.771	existing health conditions

Source: Department of Education, 2020 as cited in Mateo, 2020