RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "Teaching the ALS Way": Lessons on Educational Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The Philippines earned the reputation of experiencing the world's most prolonged and strictest lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As schoolteachers struggled to learn how to facilitate flexible and remote learning, a segment of the teacher population from the Alternative Learning System (ALS), known as the non-formal and basic education equivalency program, posted suggestions and insights on teaching the "ALS way" on social media. On that cue, the researchers mobilized the notion of teacher agency in conducting qualitative research among 325 ALS teachers, coordinators, and supervisors. Teacher agency was activated strongly by teachers' emotions, immersion in difficult circumstances experienced by the ALS learners, and the perceived dominance of inflexible formal education practices. Through the agentic practice of educational care, teachers tapped into their emotional resources to persuade learners to complete the ALS program and be hopeful for a better future. Part of educational care included utilizing scaffolding strategies for personalized learning, mobilizing social support, and making do with limited resources. Making do means discovering creative and non-traditional ways of using printed modules along with "low-tech" mobile phones and digital resources.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines earned the reputation of experiencing the world's most prolonged and strictest lockdown. During its "enhanced community quarantine," no one aged below 21 or over 60 could leave home. In addition, all offices, transport services, and schools were closed (Olanday & Rigby, 2020). When the lockdowns began in March 2020, the Department of Education (DepEd) planned hybrid learning, combining in-person classes and remote learning. However, towards the end of May 2020 (two months before the school opening), President Rodrigo Duterte suddenly announced that schools would remain closed until a vaccine for coronavirus became available. Towards the end of 2021, countries began to open their schools, and the Philippines was reported to be the last to open or provide limited face-to-face classes to a hundred of its schools (or 2% of the total number of schools in basic education; Dela Cruz, 2021). The restrictive policy on school closure called for schoolteachers to employ flexible remote learning strategies.

As remote computer-based learning was emerging to be the choice of many teachers for instruction, concerned citizens raised the issue of equity,

highlighting the fact that not all families owned a computer and had stable internet connectivity. The first National ICT Household Survey conducted in 2019 revealed that only about 23.8% of Filipino households had communal computers (Department of Information Communications Telecommunications, 2019), a figure grossly insufficient for educating school-age children and youth. The option given to students with no access to a computer and the internet was remote learning through printed modules. This arrangement, however, posed challenges to many students, such as those who could not learn independently, learners with disability, and small children who do not have capable adults to guide them (DepEd Order 2012 s. 2020). Given such challenges, there was a general feeling of bewilderment among teachers who had not yet built capacities to teach remotely.

The known practitioners in remote learning at the primary and secondary level of education are a small group of teachers belonging to the Alternative Learning System (ALS) program of the Department of Education. ALS is being delivered by the government and NGOs through mobile teachers. The target learners of the program are learners from marginalized sectors like youth workers, children in conflict with the law, persons deprived of liberty (PDL), young mothers, persons with disabilities (PWD), and members of indigenous communities. The program utilizes flexible learning strategies, a compressed curriculum, and a final challenge test (Arzadon & Nato, 2015).

During the shift toward remote learning, the ALS teachers (deemed to be a minority group) became eager to share what they knew about flexible and remote learning with their peers. From their perspective, the "new normal" was not new because such was "the ALS way" of teaching. A chorus of voices from emboldened ALS teachers rose after Dr. Carolina Guerrero, former director of the ALS Bureau, wrote a public Facebook post to express how ALS teachers could help their colleagues at the DepEd at this time of "crisis." She asserted why the "ALS way" of teaching mattered during the time of crisis:

> I believe that ALS should be made the rallying cry of the education department, that the leaders should proudly wave ALS as the answer to the crisis, as it is the only distance

learning /elearning model of the DEPED for the past 20 years and the pioneering alternative system in neighboring countries. As a learning system, it has a valid curriculum, multi-media learning resources for different types of learners, varied learning methodologies to reach the unreached, innovative teacher training modalities for learning facilitators, a wide network of supporters here and abroad, and many other elements/ components that make it a complete system of learning. DepEd should realize that there is no need to invent anything new to address this present situation…. YOU, WHO ARE ALS FAMILY, SHOULD RISE TO THE SILENT CALL TO SHOW AND SHARE THE ALS WAY. GOOD LUCK! (Guerrero, 2020)

The Facebook post was shared 473 times and generated thousands of comments, mainly from the ALS teachers. There were expressions of delight and pride to be part of a group that had the solution to the crisis, that they did it first, and were ahead of the time. Some also said that they felt vindicated because ALS, for a long time, has often been sidelined. Gunigundo (2020) took note of Dr. Guerrero's post and wrote an article in an online magazine with the title -- "ALS will save education." Gunigundo affirmed that ALS had proven its worth as it has produced many graduates, including one of the senators (and world boxing champion Manny Pacquiao). He urged DepEd to use the ALS modules instead of rushing to create new ones that will not be subjected to adequate vetting. The sense of affirmation was reinforced further when the Philippine Congress finally issued the ALS Act (Republic Act 11510) in December 2020. This law institutionalized the ALS program and specified provisions for broader participation of the stakeholders and means of resource generation.

The sudden outpouring of emotions and ideas from the ALS teachers inspired us to undertake this study, that is, to examine the practices and strategies of ALS teachers in delivering flexible and remote learning among the most marginalized Filipino learners. In analyzing the ALS teachers' practices, we utilized the notion of teacher agency, a useful concept for understanding how teachers could find ways to be effective professionals given their circumstances.

Campbell (2012) defined agency as something that "enables individuals (and, to some, collectives) to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself" (p. 183). Priestley et al. (2012) added that teachers do not achieve agency at all times or in all conditions. Agency is dependent on certain present contextual factors like environmental conditions, beliefs, values, and attributes that teachers can mobilize in a given situation. Finally, it is influenced by one's prior (habitual) experiences, also oriented toward aspirations for the future and towards the present (linking the past habits and future possibilities with the contingencies of the moment; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Exploring the agentic practices of ALS teachers responds to the current interest in drawing knowledge and insights on remote and flexible learning from the experts, especially from ALS teachers who utilize various modalities in responding to the most marginalized and hard-to-access learners. Lessons from this study may inform teachers who need to enhance their knowledge of remote and flexible learning, which they can use during emergencies like a pandemic. There is a sense that remote learning modality will be part of the norm in delivering education even after the pandemic (Cruz, 2021).

Finally, a study on ALS can help inform education policymakers and leaders in addressing the problem of increasing school dropout rates in the Philippines. Expanding the program involves hiring and training ALS teachers knowledgeable in applying remote and flexible learning in challenging contexts. Before the pandemic, the Annual Poverty Indicator Survey of 2019 reported that there were already 10.2 million Filipinos (ages 6 to 24) who were not in school (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). After one year of remote learning, additional 2.3 million students from the previous school year did not enroll in the new school year (Gotinga, 2020). At present, the number of out-of-school youth is unbelievably disproportionate to the actual number of teachers. The head of the ALS Task Force reported that there are only 8,000 ALS mobile teachers serving some 800,000 ALS learners (Ambat, 2021). This explains that out of the 10.2 million out-of-school Filipino children and youth (ages 6 to 24 years old), only 8.4% of them are enrolled in ALS (Milligan et al., 2022). It must be noted that because the ALS teachers undertake the

recruitment, the number of ALS learners is dependent on the ALS workforce.

Due to the need to train more ALS teachers, the ALS Act of 2020 recommends that colleges and universities consider including a study on ALS as part of the teacher education curriculum. Unfortunately, there are scant published articles on ALS, especially studies that examine the lives and practices of ALS mobile teachers. Existing studies, along with other information materials, affirm undoubtedly that ALS teachers are subjected to high-intensity challenges. Unlike the typical schoolteachers that welcome students to their classroom, ALS mobile teachers traverse mountains and bodies of water, find their way into dumpsites, wet markets, jails, and drug rehabilitation centers, to teach their learners individually or in groups (see Arzadon & Nato, 2015; Education Impact Hub, 2014). Rogers (2004) wrote that there is a growing interest in examining current nonformal education programs in light of lifelong learning studies. It is reaffirmed that nonformal learning programs like ALS are indeed distinct from formal educational systems, but the former (which is more flexible and participatory) can complement and reinforce the mainstream program. This study responds to the need to describe that other part of basic education.

## The Study: Focus and Method

Informed by the notion of teacher agency in the context of remote and flexible learning in a Philippine setting, this paper responds to the following questions: (a) In what ways do ALS teachers practice their agency in facilitating remote and flexible learning? And (b) What personal resources and contextual factors underpin ALS teachers' practice of agency?

In this study, we examined the notion of teacher agency as the socially mediated capacity of an individual to strategically respond to problematic situations. Agents or actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment. Agency is the interplay of individual efforts, available resources (economic, cultural, and social), and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach to explore the insights and meanings

primarily from the experiences and perspectives of the research participants. The context and contextual factors are significant in understanding the topic of interest (Harrison et al., 2017). Case studies often explore the "hows" and "whys" of a phenomenon while taking into consideration how the phenomenon is influenced by contextual conditions (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This study's primary data emanated from a survey that used open-ended questions for ALS teachers and supervisors who have worked for more than five years, from urban and rural settings, distributed in the Philippines' three major island groups. The study yielded 325 distinct responses. Due to our previous link to the ALS community, we would regularly engage with the ALS through private informal discussions using Instant Messenger. When probing a specific concern that emanated from the survey, we informed their interlocutors that the conversation was related to their current study. This study ensured that the real identities of the ALS teachers who supplied information were concealed.

The survey asked the teachers to write their thoughts and experiences on flexible and remote learning that other teachers can use during the pandemic. In addition, it inquired how they utilized various educational technologies and how they monitored learners and kept them motivated. The transcripts from online discussions, survey responses, and field notes, including secondary data, were analyzed to identify themes and significant information that respond to this study's objectives.

## Findings and Discussion

The following sections present how ALS teachers demonstrated their agency in facilitating flexible learning using various learning modalities among the most challenging groups of learners. After reading and analyzing the narratives from our interlocutors, we discovered, to our surprise, how the narratives were suffused with deep emotions. The teachers described how much they loved and cared for their students and other learners who were struggling with remote learning. They also described how they felt as they responded to emotions expressed by learners and the family members. Though the teachers struggled in the work, they expressed delight and satisfaction

because they did something that mattered for social transformation.

In the same vein, the ALS teachers deployed emotions to facilitate learning and become the barometer of learning. Success meant that learners remained motivated to complete their modules and hopeful about their future. The teachers likened their agency to an act of caring, like one who is "wooing" a lover. ALS teachers repeatedly expressed that a teacher needs to have a "heart" and *malasakit* (deep concern) to thrive in ALS. Through the emotion-laden narratives, we found that emotions are embodied and become the site of achieving teacher agency expressed as "educational care." The effort to be a caring teacher through emotional labor is influenced by one's stance on the value of caring in education (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

This study examined emotions beyond the conventional view, where they are perceived simply as internal states. This study revealed that emotions could be a resource in achieving teacher agency expressed as educational care. Emotions are an active phenomenon identified and constituted as part of the socio-cultural field (Lyon, 2008). Often, emotions experienced by teachers are associated with experiences of exhaustion and burnout (Chang, 2009). Without minimizing the possible negative impact of extreme emotional work, this study explored how emotions can contribute to more caring pedagogy, especially among marginalized learners. Zembylas (2007) found in his study that social justice teaching (in the context of marginalized Afro-American students) is inherently emotional. The value of emotions is also implicated in distance education studies, especially in the community of inquiry (COI) approach. The COI proponents asserted that remote learning could effectively happen when the presence of the teacher and other participants is felt (Garrison et al., 2000).

### Seeking Out and Persuading Students to be Hopeful for a Better Future

The ALS learners' socio-economic condition is often characterized as disadvantaged and in a perpetual state of crisis. Dropping out of school is associated with illiteracy, intergenerational poverty, child labor, domestic abuse, early marriage, and pregnancy. Areas with the greatest number of school leavers are known for high incidents of armed conflicts (David et al., 2018). Even in policy papers, ALS learners are

described as "deprived, depressed and underserved" (Executive Order 356, 2004). In this light, an ALS teacher's role is not just to transmit knowledge but to rekindle broken hopes and dreams among their students (Mahinay, 2018). One ALS teacher said that he remained in the ALS program even if he had opportunities to work in a more prestigious position because of the potential social transformation that is brought about when an out-of-school youth completes their education. Emirbeyer and Mische (1998) wrote that teacher agency is influenced by the possibilities created by one's aspirations about the future. It is the capacity to imagine alternative possibilities. This future-oriented projection as a dimension of teacher agency compels the ALS teacher to find ways to keep the learners from dropping out of the program.

Unlike in the formal education setup where students come and enroll in school, the ALS mobile teachers' first responsibility is to find and enlist their learners. Each ALS mobile teacher should have at least 75 students per school year. This meant that each teacher was to locate school leavers and out-of-school youth and adults (including those who have never enrolled in school) and facilitate their re-entry into the basic education system. ALS classes consist of diverse learners, both young and old. Recruiting ALS learners take place through "literacy mapping." Mobile ALS teachers, in partnership with village leaders, would go house-to-house and scour the community to locate and enlist potential ALS learners. Teachers assess new ALS learners' literacy level and prior knowledge that will inform their placement in the program (basic literacy, elementary, junior high school, or senior high school). After taking in a student, the teacher will facilitate learning through independent study, one-on-one tutorials, group discussions, radio/TV-based instruction, and online classes. Self-learning modules, radio recordings, and other resources have been produced for the ALS program. The learning sessions are meant to develop K-12 competencies and, at the same time, life skills. When the learners are ready, usually after a year or two, they take the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test. Passing the final challenge test will provide formal credentials that will qualify the learners for the next education level or be used as a symbolic capital for employment. Though ALS offers the possibility of obtaining a credential through an abbreviated route, reports reveal that the ALS dropout rate is quite steep. Milligan et al. (2022) reported that from 2016 to 2018, only 65% completed the ALS program, and a smaller number (27%) took the A&E Test.

One mobile teacher recounted that they do not merely enlist the students in the ALS program. Teachers see that their major task is to keep students motivated to complete the ALS modules and pass the A&E test. Andrada (2006) described ways to keep ALS learners in the program: (a) Proactively address learning gaps through a remediation program; (b) Give incentives to attendance and participation; (c) Form student organizations and lead activities based on student interests; (d) Create graduation awareness campaign; (e) Utilize differentiated instruction; and (f) Home visitation. It is notable that the list involves not only practical interventions but ways of keeping interested and motivated by deepening social relationships and creating anticipation for graduation.

The ALS teachers in this study said that they knew that teaching in a remote learning context, especially among marginalized learners, requires emotional work to maintain the interest of their learners. They described how they persuade their learners to hold on and remain motivated until the end. One teacher articulated what others said about this matter:

> First of all, it is hard to convince or motivate a student to have hope and resume his schooling, but I have to do it because I love my students, and I am committed to my work as an ALS Mobile Teacher. I show them evidence of other ALS graduates who also felt hopeless at first but eventually became successful and finished their education. I make clear to them that I am willing to help to the best of my ability as long that they do their part of continuing their schooling.

The usual practice in ensuring retention is showing the learners what they could become when they complete the ALS program. Teachers would tell stories and show photos of ALS graduates wearing their togas or graduation dress. Stories about ALS graduates getting an award and topping the board exam are highlighted to prove "*na kaya nilang makipagsabayan*" (they can keep up with the mainstream students). When asked what they do to keep their students in the program, the usual response is to identify and respond to the felt needs of the learners. Because most ALS students are poor, the teachers would not

limit their lessons to the academic content of the K to 12 curriculum but would include practical content like technical-vocational and livelihood training. The end goal was for the students to obtain credentials that they can use for higher education and the means to have a better and "decent" (or legal and legitimate) job or enterprise.

In the following sections, we see how teachers keep their students in the program by developing deep emotional connections, applying utmost flexibility, employing various scaffolding strategies, and providing social support to enable students to work on their modules on their own, despite the limited resources.

### Teaching as "Making Do" With the Least Resources

Teaching in an ALS context requires contextualizing established teaching-learning theories and practices in a nonformal education context. If schools have a regular classroom, the ALS community learning center can be a makeshift room in the community (barangay hall), church, or home. Teaching in the "ALS way" involves making do with whatever resources are available for the teachers and the learners. Agency implies the application of old and just practices and values in the learning environment or innovating the familiar around previous practices and values (Kidd & Murray, 2020, p. 552).

In the Learning Continuity Plan issued by the Department of Education (DepEd, Order 12 s.2020), teachers may utilize the digital versions of the modules in teaching students who have a "gadget" and connectivity. The files can be loaded into a thumb drive that some students can access through a computer or a mobile phone. They can also utilize the internet for synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. Learners with access to information and communication technology (ICT) may download materials from the internet, complete and submit assignments online, and attend webinars and virtual classes.

One ALS teacher expressed her concern when she observed how schoolteachers who were doing remote learning for the first time tended to insert many graphics or images into the slide presentations that they were preparing for their online classes. Having been exposed to low-income ALS students, she knew that such a practice was not the way to go. High-resolution images are not friendly to the low-tech or low-data gadgets used by low-resourced students. She eventually suggested that her schoolteacher friends create low-bytes digital resources instead.

Many ALS teachers narrated that ALS students do not often have access to a mobile phone or the internet. Although some students may have a "gadget," they may not have money to buy enough "load" or digital data to view photos and video files or participate in a video conference. What they recommend is that teachers use text-based applications. The Facebook free application allows its members to send and receive text files even when the mobile phone does not have enough load. However, this means that the teacher must encode the texts manually. One teacher expressed how she encodes the lessons and sends them to her students, including one with a disability and who does not possess a gadget.

> I contact my student through Facebook group or one-on-one chat. It is a bit difficult. I type the lessons on my mobile phone's keypad until my head becomes achy and my fingers get numb. ... "ansya ko pa nga bcoz i love teaching tlaga sa ALS" [this is happiness because I really love teaching in the ALS]. I just remind myself that no job is easy…I take time to call students who cannot go online. I have one student with a disability. He is poor and has no mobile phone, but he has a kind neighbor who has the gadget to receive my text messages. The neighbor writes the lessons on pad paper and hands them to my student. Teachers should be flexible in all circumstances. (from an ALS Teacher of more than 10 years)

Many educators and development workers say that Facebook offers the cheapest and most accessible learning tool during the pandemic. Teachers converse with their students through Facebook. They send image files, URL links, and text files through Facebook's Instant Messenger. They painstakingly copy and encode on their mobile phone the text from the modules or worksheets, including explanatory notes. Aside from sending lessons, the teachers also use free Facebook and text messages to remind the students to listen and take notes during the scheduled broadcasting of educational programs aired on radio and TV. It is notable in the above extract that though the learner did

not have a mobile phone, the ALS teacher exercised resourcefulness by finding somebody in the learner's social circle who could transmit the lessons. And she inserted in her narration that what influenced such action was her emotions of joy and love for teaching in ALS.

Resorting to remote learning has exacerbated the so-called digital divide that existed in the old normal. Hence, the shift to digital learning will require teachers in formal education to practice digital pedagogies that are sensitive to their learners' digital resources and capacities. Remote learning is a new arena for teachers who are used to face-to-face classroom instruction. The use of video-conferencing applications is often seen to be the most convenient enactment of classroom instruction. Teachers can see their students and talk to them through a monitor screen on a real-time basis. However, with the lack of gadgets and unstable connectivity, teachers would have to make do with "low-tech" solutions.

In addition, some strategies were undertaken to ensure safety and limit face-to-face interaction for ALS teachers handling ALS students during the pandemic. Many ALS teachers tapped support from the village (barangay) leaders. They arranged that the barangay hall be used as a drop-off and pick-up point for modules. In some cases, neighbors and friends were also tapped to distribute and collect materials from ALS students. For those with access to gadgets and the internet, the modular instruction was supplemented with periodic online *kumustahan* [informal sharing and updating] through Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and Google Meet.

### *Flexibility as Strategy and Disposition*

The ALS teachers' narration about guiding each of their students for modular instruction reveals how remote learning differs from regular in-person instruction. There was a feeling among ALS teachers that mainstream teachers would have to adjust a lot and unlearn some unquestioned assumptions about teaching. The ALS teachers pointed out that teachers handling modular instruction must practice flexibility, resourcefulness, and creativity.

The approach is different when a teacher uses online or modular instruction because the teacher must deal with each individual student. In a classroom setting, you practice one general approach for the group. This is the reason why teachers from formal education must work hard and be extra patient and understanding. (Male, District ALS Coordinator)

As revealed by ALS teachers, flexibility is applied in the choice of place (which can be the classroom, home, workplace, or the virtual world), time and duration, choice of lessons, and teaching/learning strategy. What is the basis for flexibility? In most cases, decisions on flexibility were based on the learner's preference or condition at home or work. For example, the mothers would join the ALS classes when their children are already of school age. Some ALS classes were conducted in the workplace, like the market during lull periods (Arzadon & Nato, 2015). The imperative for flexibility in remote learning implies the need to critically examine the often unquestioned rigid practices and procedures in the formal system. DepEd Order 47 s.2002 states that the ALS, as a nonformal education program, is meant to break the traditional learning barriers in formal education. These barriers are making education inaccessible. Rogers (2004) wrote that nonformal education was formulated to address the insufficiencies and criticism against the formal educational system, and it is "inherently rigid, homogenous, static, and resistant to change" (p. 236).

The element of flexibility in nonformal education or alternative education is often couched in instrumentalist terms (like the choice of place, time, and materials). However, in one discussion thread in the ALS Facebook Group, an ALS teacher defined flexible learning beyond practical strategies, and also as a disposition:

- "Adapting to his own pace, schedule, short-term and long-term engagement with learning activities. It is a process of discovering what is suitable for your student."
- "It is putting yourself in the shoes of your learner."
- "It involves recognizing your learner's dignity and ability to make an informed decision."
- "It involves a teacher's ability to adapt to new situations, improvise, and shift strategies to meet different types of challenges."

- "Parang pangliligaw. Ginagawa at sinusunod ang gusto nya, na kahit minsan inaayawan yung hangarin mo ay hindi ka pa rin humihinto [It is like wooing a person you love. You do what that person wants. You do not stop even if your intentions are repudiated]."

Flexibility as disposition means how a teacher views herself and her students. It requires seeing one's learner with affection, as one to be wooed, which necessitates improvisation and quick response to changes. Priestley et al. (2012) wrote that "teacher agency is largely about repertoires for manoeuvre, or the possibilities for different forms of action available to teachers at particular points in time" (p. 36). The repertoires for maneuver that teachers can tap into in the present are informed by the teacher's past experiences and what she sees in the future.

Migrating from formal education and shifting to alternative modalities is not easy. The change is often perceived as a paradigm shift. ALS teacher observed that in formal education, the students must be the ones to adjust to the teacher's requirements. One new ALS teacher said that there is a big difference between teaching in formal and nonformal settings; thus, he recommended that teachers attend a seminar to understand how to utilize flexible learning methods effectively.

### *Activating Emotions Towards Educational Care*

When asked about her strategies for keeping her students motivated to stay in the program, the ALS teacher said, "I have to do it because I love my students, and I am committed to my work as an ALS mobile teacher." Exercising agency allows mobile teachers to bring into their work their values, aspirations, emotions, and capacities. In a situation where the crisis is unprecedented, the pedagogical approach (i.e., strategies and solutions) is not only achieved through personal capacity, material resources, and contextual factors (Priestley et al., 2012), but also through other forms of capital, such as emotions. The emotional capital in this situation mediates teachers' capacity to act.

Drawing on a post-structural perspective (Zembylas, 2007), emotions are seen as an essential element that shapes one's agency (Benesch, 2020). Forms of emotional capital can be converted to cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and values) and social capital (networks) (Cottingham, 2016). Emotions are cultivated in care work (Colley et al., 2003; Reay, 2004). Zembylas' (2003) work on emotional capital suggests a political understanding of the phenomenon we are witnessing among ALS teachers who are asserting their identity in the broader education sector. Having subscribed and facilitated certain rules and norms for practice in teaching as one of ethics and care, they are now seeking to re-channel the attention of those in power to their collective value as not necessarily the less-knowledgeable and needy but rather the opposite. Without consciously meaning to do so, they may be attempting to disturb or "subvert the normalizing assumptions that underlie the notion of a common 'teacher identity.'" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 124).

ALS has been attractive to teachers who see the program as a means for personal and social transformation. The image of an ALS mobile teacher is unlike that of a regular classroom teacher who is garbed in a nicely tailored school uniform. The ALS mobile teacher wears a pair of running shoes, a comfortable shirt, and loose pants. She traverses dark alleys of the city's slum areas and wet markets. In the country, she crosses rivers and seas and climbs mountains to find ALS students. What the ALS teachers do is sometimes called a "search and rescue" operation (Arzadon & Nato, 2015). Descriptions of the nature of their relationship with their learners teem with empathy and mutual care as common themes:

- "Seeing them beyond their physical appearance is the key to understanding them. In my three years of teaching, I have learned to listen from the heart and listen with full attention so that my students will believe in themselves and make the right decisions in life.
- "I was once like them, an out-of-school youth, too, and took an equivalency test like ALS. And so, I challenge them not to give up even when they are already old. I tell them that age does not matter in education."
- "I became emotional when my student's mother came down from the mountain to give me a bag of vegetables. She was in tears and thanked me for helping her child regain her lost dream."

Teaching in ALS contexts requires deploying enormous emotional capital because of the effort required to convince learners that they still have hope

to fulfill their dreams through education. Teachers describe how they spend time with students and visit them at home. Teachers developed a sense of emotional kinship that made them feel that they were one with them, and they could be vulnerable when the learner and their family expressed their emotions. This sense of vulnerability was demonstrated by one female teacher who was challenged by her student to lose weight, and she did. To reach out means establishing a teacher-student/family relationship grounded on mutual trust. Once trust is earned, one ALS teacher said it has a domino effect. The student becomes more willing to participate in the teaching-learning process. Visiting the learners in their homes also allowed the teachers to understand their home contexts and the students' funds of knowledge. This includes their family history of schooling, available resources at home, and the community that can support learning (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

The history of ALS reflects a caring identity within an education system created and meant for the marginalized members of the community. Emotions that come with educational care are activated during the teachers' immersion in the field, outside the safe environment of the school. Through their immersion in the lives of marginalized and low-resourced learners, they have since embodied certain practices and beliefs about effective teaching in their field. The entire process of teaching and securing students' participation in ALS involves sustained efforts of nurturing teacher-student/family relationships, calling for pedagogical practices anchored on the ethics of empathy and care. This stance is something that teachers need to demonstrate as they relate to students who are suffering the effects of prolonged lockdown.

During the pandemic, some ALS teachers demonstrated their devotion to their students by venturing out to visit their learners' villages or meet them in ALS learning centers. They defied directives for total lockdown in homes just so their learners could take the final exit assessment. They had to reach out to students who could not complete their portfolios before the lockdown. ALS teachers felt that it was their duty to go out and help those same students to organize their portfolios to fulfill the requirements for taking the test.

In the "old normal," teachers in formal schools did not have to go out to seek out learners because children trooped to their classrooms every day of the school year. However, during the pandemic, just like in the ALS world, schoolteachers are obliged to search for their students and find ways to make them stay on course based on the scheduled tasks. In addition, they must contact and coordinate with the leaders of villages to distribute modules and other resources. This task requires the kind of commitment and community engagement skills that have long been a feature of ALS mobile services. However, the risk-taking stance that comes naturally with ALS duties goes against workers' safety requirements during the coronavirus pandemic. The zealous ALS teachers would then need to reconfigure their risk-taking stance in the light of a health emergency. This is particularly important, considering that ALS learning sessions are often conducted in crowded and high-risk areas. Like frontlines in hospitals, should teachers think of themselves first before reaching out to learners? Maybe teachers who continue to serve in difficult circumstances need to be seen as heroes, too, along with health caregivers.

### Perceived Rigidities and Dominance of Formal Education

When asked what advice the mobile teachers would give to the teachers in the formal education setting, a common reply is the need to unlearn some formal education practices. Teachers should be self-reflective on their assumptions about classroom learning and willing to explore other means of learning at home and in a community context. They must know how to utilize ALS strategies associated with self-learning modules and radio-based instruction. This study argues that one condition that influenced ALS teachers to exercise their agency through education was the dominance of the rigid mainstream school system. The ALS teachers knew that any regular teacher, if left to autopilot, would do things that might be inappropriate for ALS learners. This is the reason that they sought to share their ideas on remote learning on social media and with their peers.

Teachers in formal education contexts organize their daily activities based on a budget of work prescribed by the school or the district. They facilitate classroom activities for a group of students who come to school for six hours each day, Monday to Friday. The budget of work prescribes what topics to teach for a defined period. All teachers should follow the budget of work because certain activities like periodic examinations, sports meets, scouting days, and special celebrations are conducted synchronously.

In the ALS setup, teachers may have to modify the rigid structures of the formal school and make personalized learning sessions flexible based on the "convenient time of the learners." The ALS teachers acknowledge that ALS students have work and family responsibilities. Because a mobile teacher is assigned to two or more learning centers, face-to-face meetings (in the old normal) were usually held only once weekly. For the rest of the week, students bring home the modules for independent study. Facilitating learning in such a remote setup using a printed module alone reveals the distinct capacity of ALS teachers.

The following are suggestions given by the ALS teachers on how to facilitate remote learning with individual students using a printed module alone:

- "Make sure that you give clear instructions at the start."
- "Do not give all the modules at the same time so that the students will not feel stressed."
- "Prioritize modules that the student finds interesting and relevant to his life."
- "I create worksheets for added exercises and the pre-test and the post-test."
- "Our teachers "chopped" the modules into smaller lessons. Then, they contextualized the materials by translating them into the learners' mother tongue."
- "Talk to their parents to assist and guide their children."

While the students are working on their modules, teachers employ strategies to enable the students to keep on moving until they finish their work:

- "I do not merely leave the module with the student. I follow them up by sending a text message to their mobile phone or Instant Messenger. I ask them what page they are working on."
- "I set a date when I am going to collect the worksheets."
- "Motivate them and remind them to study their lessons. I tell them the benefits of education."
- "I also visit the student at home and teach him there."
- "I always show concern and ask how they are doing."
- "Provide other references or books to read."

- "I provide a reward and positive reinforcement."

The ALS teachers, through time, have developed strategies for making modular instruction work for each individual learner. Scaffolding personalized learning involves providing proper orientation, providing readable and language-appropriate materials, and giving adequate exercises and resources to ensure mastery. It also necessitates establishing a social support system to assist the student at home. Once the student starts working on a module, the teacher monitors the student and helps him stay on course by activating emotional and social support.

The experiences of ALS students with the printed modules are noteworthy because, based on initial reports, most low-income students in formal schools have chosen the (printed) modular instruction mode (over the online modality). The Learning Continuity Plan of the Department of Education states: "One key issue is equity in terms of learners' access to technology, gadgets, and household support to learning. Learners who do not have internet access at home will still have printed modules and textbooks for independent learning…" (DepEd, 2020). In other words, students who do not have access to computers and stable internet connectivity would depend on modular instruction for remote learning. The Department of Education assured the public that they would reproduce enough printed modules to be distributed to each household (Magsambol, 2020). School heads are told to draw funds from their school budget and mobilize additional resources from the local government unit and community partners. School officials purchase printers, ink, and papers that will be used to reproduce self-learning modules.

The critique on the rigidities in the formal school system is often associated with the application of a one-size-fits-all curriculum. This setup is often perceived to be incompatible with making education inclusive and responsive to diverse learners (see Moon et al., 2003; Phillips, 2006; Freire et al., 2021). Though nonformal education (NFE) advocates five decades ago asserted that NFE programs (like ALS) are substantially different from formal education, through time, NFE became more formalized. Similarly, formal education has also adopted some features of nonformal learning approaches (Rogers, 2004). Despite the growing convergence, there would still be some differences, as asserted by the ALS teachers in this study.

## Conclusion

The teachers' narratives revealed how agency was activated by teachers' emotional capital, immersion in their learners' difficult circumstances, and the perceived dominance of inflexible practices in formal schooling. Agency was influenced by the teachers' accumulated past experiences, evaluation of the present, and orientation toward alternative futures for their learners. Teacher agency expressed as educational care utilized emotional resources to effectively convince students to remain in the program and be hopeful for a better future. Through the sense of emotional kinship, they also received the emotions of care and gratefulness coming from the ALS learners and their families. Educational care means making do with whatever resources the learners have, utilizing scaffolding strategies for personalized learning, mobilizing social support, and finding creative and non-traditional ways of using low-tech mobile phones and digital resources. The interesting practices involved in maximizing the use of these technologies must be examined further by education technology researchers.

This study argued that ALS mobile teachers could offer valuable insights to inform the practice of flexible and remote learning that can be utilized, especially among low-resourced learners enrolled in formal schools. The description of ALS teaching strategies and insights is also instructive for training and preparing aspiring ALS teachers. It is unfortunate that the ALS teachers were not given opportunities to share their insights on flexible and remote learning in a public forum. The brief moment of outpourings on Facebook led by the former chief of the ALS program became the only chance for the teachers to express their emotions openly to the public. Nevertheless, we hope this article has substantially captured what ALS teachers know, which can enrich the body of knowledge on teacher education, nonformal education, and lifelong learning. This study was limited to gathering information about ALS teachers' strategies in facilitating personalized learning for individual learners. It must be noted that ALS teachers also facilitated group instruction through limited face-to-face sessions and online technologies. The study did not analyze the ALS module content. The topic of teacher agency, as applied in other dimensions of remote learning, can be explored through future research.

Priestley et al. (2012) wrote that teacher agency (which emanated from the classical sociological theories of Bourdieu and Giddens) is "undertheorized" and a "misconstrued" phenomenon. We hope that this study provided more substance to the theory as it is applied in education. Exploring the dimension of emotions in teacher agency is an exciting topic that also warrants further exploration. For example, there were indications that ALS teachers tend to create emotional connections among their students. How does this happen? How does social (and emotional) presence among fellow ALS learners in a remote learning context take place? What are the limits of emotion-driven teacher agency?

Teachers' awareness of the emotional aspect of their work, like what they know about content, teaching strategies, curriculum, and school culture, is crucial in creating the conditions for learning and social change. Unfortunately, as education researchers, we found that the cognitivist and behaviorist view of teaching and learning is often the default in education practice. And during the COVID-19 pandemic, most studies on education that emerged were more focused on the use of sophisticated technologies, which may not be applicable among marginalized students in a developing country like the Philippines. We hope that the lessons on educational care described as the "teaching the ALS way" provide alternative ways of imagining education that can be responsive to the needs of out-of-school children, youth, and adults whose number is expected to have increased some more due to the prolonged school lockdown.

## Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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