



Inspiring Journeys of Education and Empowerment of ALS Completers

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to thematically analyze the compelling success stories and narratives of Alternative Learning System (ALS) completers of the Department of Education (DepEd) Schools Division of Apayao, how ALS became an instrument in providing educational opportunities to individuals who, for various reasons, were unable to complete formal schooling, and uncover how their journeys have been shaped by the program's influence on their motivational paths toward education and empowerment.

This study is guided by three key theoretical frameworks: Self-Determination Theory of Motivation, the Macro Theory of Positive Functioning, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The study employed an Input-Process-Output research paradigm to analyze the collected data.

Results revealed themes of resilience and overcoming adversity, educational empowerment, community support and mentorship, personal growth and reflection, and family support among the ALS completers.

The study concludes that ALS completers exhibit high levels of resilience and determination, with the ALS program playing a critical role in empowering individuals through educational opportunities that lead to personal and professional growth. Community support and mentorship are identified as crucial elements enhancing the educational journeys of ALS completers, facilitating personal growth and self-reflection.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System, education and empowerment, thematic analysis, qualitative research, Apayao

INTRODUCTION

Creating an illiterate-free global village is one of the core mandates of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Given this, several education programs intended for this purpose were launched. Education for All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are among these programs rolled out by the agency.

Despite the concerted efforts of the agency to combat illiteracy, however, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) reported that as of 2018, 258.4 million children, adolescents, and youth are still out of school. These numbers represent one-sixth of the world's population of this age group. These figures, the UIS claimed, suggest that the world is still far from attaining its goals for universal access to primary and secondary education.

As reported by the United Nations Human Development Report in 2016, the Philippines is one of the Southeast Asian nations with a high literacy rate, which stood at 98.9% and 97% among men and women aged 15-24, respectively. While high, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported that the two percent gap represents 3.6 million youth aged 16-24 who are out of school as of 2017. This number, though, is much lower than the registered 3.8 million in 2016 (United Nations Development Programme, 2016; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017).



More recent data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2022) reveals that the out-of-school children and youth (OSCY) population in the Philippines remains a significant concern, with approximately 2.8 million OSCY recorded in 2021, representing about 10.2% of the total population aged 5-24 years old. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with economic disruptions, health concerns, and the shift to remote learning contributing to increased dropout rates and learning losses. The World Bank (2022) reported that the Philippines experienced one of the longest school closures in the world, lasting over two years, which disproportionately affected marginalized learners and those without access to digital resources.

The country's strong performance in addressing illiteracy, both internationally and domestically, can be credited to the government's effort to combat this menace. More than a decade ago, the government committed to upholding UNESCO-led programs such as the EFA, MDGs, and the most recent SDGs. This commitment is further bolstered by legislating Republic Act 9155, the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001. This law served as the legal framework for major reform of the country's basic education system. Among others, it guaranteed the delivery of education through an alternative viable mode. Thus, the birth of the country's Alternative Learning System (ALS). Thereafter, Executive Order No. 365, s. 2004 was issued, which created the Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS) of the Department of Education (DepEd). BALS would then become the lead bureau for the implementation of all program offerings in the ALS.

ALS is defined in RA 9155 as a parallel learning system that provides a viable alternative to the existing formal education instruction. It encompasses both non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills. Its program offerings are clientele-needs-based. These include the Basic Literacy Program (BLP), Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E), Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd), Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education in ALS (ALIVE in ALS), ALS for Differently-Abled Persons (ALS-DAP), Radio-Based Instruction (RBI), and Education and Skills Training (EST), among others (Department of Education, 2001; Republic Act No. 9155, 2001).

The ALS program has undergone significant policy developments in recent years. Republic Act No. 11510, also known as the "Alternative Learning System Act," was signed into law on December 23, 2020, institutionalizing the ALS as a parallel learning system and mandating the establishment of ALS Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in every municipality and city nationwide. This landmark legislation strengthens the ALS program by providing for the hiring of ALS teachers, the development of appropriate learning materials, and the allocation of necessary resources. The DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2019, also known as the "Policy Guidelines on the Implementation of the Alternative Learning System," provides the operational framework for ALS implementation, including the Enhanced ALS Basic Education Curriculum, the ALS Program Delivery Modes, and the assessment and certification procedures.

Furthermore, the DepEd Order No. 35, s. 2020, provides guidelines on the implementation of the ALS Senior High School Program, expanding the ALS offerings to include secondary education. The ALS program has also adapted to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic through the implementation of various distance learning modalities, including modular, online, and radio-based instruction, as outlined in DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2020.

In the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), the ALS program has been instrumental in reaching underserved communities, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas (GIDAs). The Department of Education – Cordillera Administrative Region (DepEd-CAR) reported that for School Year 2022-2023, there were approximately 15,000 ALS learners enrolled across the region, with the Schools Division of Apayao contributing a significant number of completers. The ALS program in Apayao has been particularly successful in reaching indigenous peoples (IP) communities, out-of-school youth, and adults who wish to complete their basic education.

Years after various ALS programs have been institutionalized in the Philippines, DepEd Apayao ALS continues to produce program completers, A&E test passers, and ALS Presentation Portfolio Assessment (ALS-PPA) passers. However, there is a lack of studies focused on thematically analyzing the success stories of ALS passers in this context. With this in mind, this present academic undertaking intends to thematize the



success stories of selected ALS passers with the end goal of exploring the perceived influence of ALS on the lives of these ALS learners as they pursued literacy acquisition (Department of Education, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What themes can be derived from the ALS completers' narratives and success stories?
2. How do the participants describe the influence of the ALS program on their lives, particularly regarding education and empowerment?

Framework of the Study

In the mountainous region of Apayao province in the Cordillera Administrative Region, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) of DepEd has been instrumental in providing educational opportunities to individuals who, for various reasons, were unable to complete formal schooling. This study delves into the narratives and success stories of three selected ALS completers from Apayao, aiming to explore how their journeys have been shaped by the program's perceived influence on their motivational paths toward education and empowerment.

This study is guided by three key theoretical frameworks to illuminate the motivational paths and empowerment experiences of ALS completers:

Self-Determination Theory of Motivation. This framework provides insights into the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that drive individuals to engage in educational pursuits, emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as critical components influencing motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Macro Theory of Positive Functioning. This theoretical perspective focuses on the broader societal and environmental factors that contribute to positive outcomes, such as education and empowerment. It helps contextualize how social support, community factors, and cultural influences impact the trajectories of ALS completers (Keyes, 2007).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's framework is used to understand how ALS completers' educational and empowerment journeys fulfill fundamental human needs, progressing from basic physiological needs to higher-order needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

These frameworks are supported by the following theories:

Motivation Theories: These theories, like the expectancy-value theory by Eccles and Wigfield, explore how a student's belief in their ability to succeed (expectancy) and the value they place on learning (subjective task value) influence their academic choices and behaviors. Success stories can highlight students who developed strong expectancies and high task value, leading them to excel (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Self-Efficacy Theory: Proposed by Albert Bandura, this theory emphasizes the importance of a student's belief in their capabilities to achieve a goal. Success stories can showcase students who developed strong self-efficacy through positive experiences and encouragement, allowing them to persevere through challenges (Bandura, 1997).

Growth Mindset Theory: Developed by Carol Dweck, this theory distinguishes between a fixed mindset (believing intelligence is static) and a growth mindset (believing intelligence can develop). Success stories can illustrate how students who embraced a growth mindset were more likely to tackle difficult tasks and learn from mistakes, ultimately achieving success (Dweck, 2006).

Social Learning Theory: This theory, by Albert Bandura, emphasizes how we learn through observing and imitating others. Success stories can function as models for other students, demonstrating effective learning strategies and inspiring them to achieve similar results (Bandura, 1977).

Ecological Systems Theory: This theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner highlights the interconnectedness of a student's environment and their success. Success stories can emphasize the positive role supportive families, engaged teachers, and enriching school communities play in fostering student achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

To capture the rich and diverse experiences of ALS completers in Apayao, a qualitative research approach was employed. Semi-structured interviews and narrative inquiry techniques were utilized to collect in-depth personal accounts of their educational journeys and the perceived influence of the ALS program. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring themes and patterns across narratives, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how the theoretical frameworks manifest in their stories.

Further, this study seeks to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical implications for educational policy and practice. By elucidating the motivational pathways and empowerment dynamics among ALS completers through the lenses of Self-Determination Theory, Macro Theory of Positive Functioning, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, it aims to inform educational interventions that can better support marginalized learners in achieving educational success and personal empowerment.

RESEARCH PARADIGM

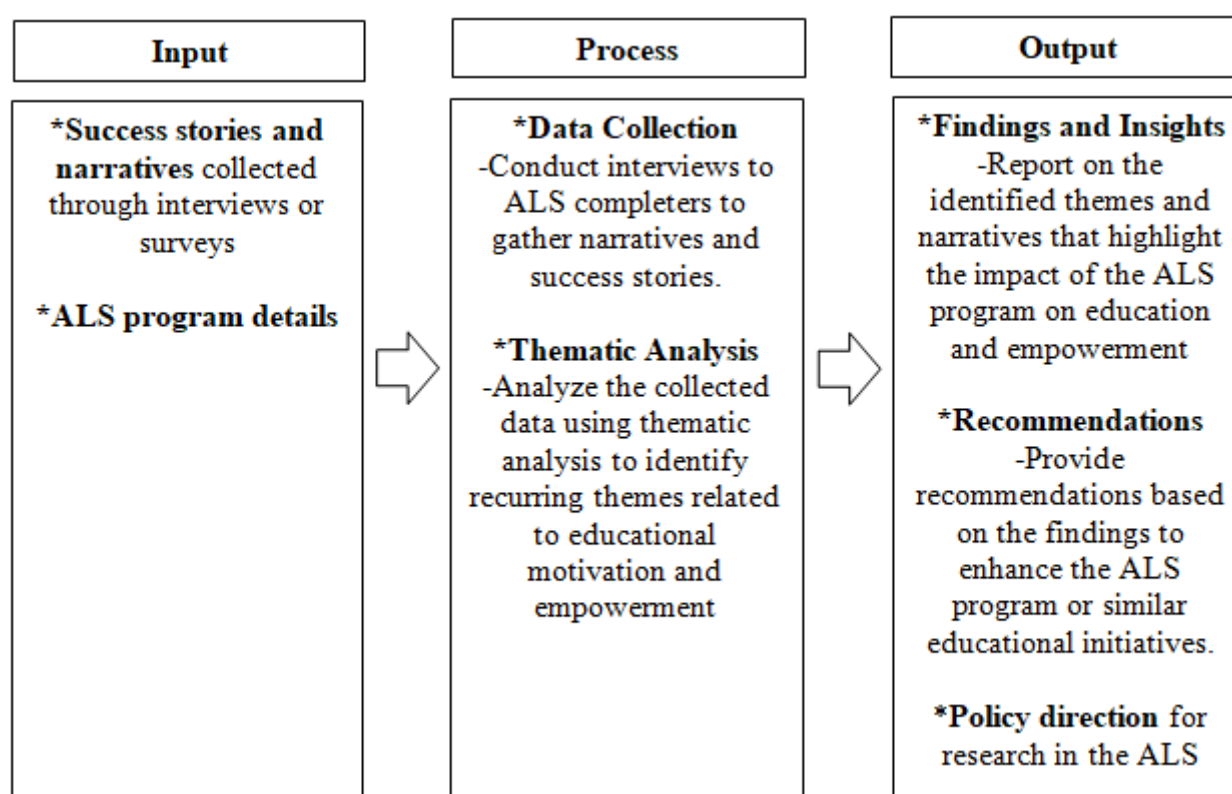


Figure 1: Paradigm of the Study

The IPO (Input-Process-Output) model was utilized to structure the framework of this study. The Input of the study included the profile of ALS completers from Apayao, their success stories and narratives collected through interviews, and ALS program details. These inputs represent the foundational data and resources that were evaluated and analyzed during the study. The Process involved data collection through the conduct of interviews with ALS completers to gather narratives and success stories, thematic analysis to analyze the collected data and identify recurring themes related to educational motivation and empowerment, and impact assessment to evaluate how the ALS program influenced the motivational paths of the completers toward education and empowerment. The Outputs are the findings, insights, or reports on the identified themes and narratives that highlight the perceived influence of the ALS program on education and empowerment. Recommendations are also provided based on the findings to enhance the ALS program or similar initiatives.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study investigated the success stories and narratives of three selected Alternative Learning System (ALS) completers in Apayao province, focusing on how their experiences within the ALS Program have influenced their motivational paths toward education and empowerment. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perceived transformative influence of the ALS Program on individuals' educational journeys, guided by three key theoretical frameworks: Self-Determination Theory of Motivation, Macro Theory of Positive Functioning, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically thematic analysis, to explore and interpret the success stories and narratives of ALS completers in Apayao. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility in uncovering patterns and themes within qualitative data, aligning with the study's aim to understand the perceived influence of the ALS Program on educational motivation and empowerment pathways (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Locale of the Study

This study focused on the success stories of three (3) notable ALS completers of the Schools Division of Apayao.

The study was conducted in April to May 2024.

Participants of the Study

The researcher used snowball sampling in identifying the participants where one interviewee gives the researcher the name of at least one or more potential interviewees. That interviewee, in turn, provides the name of at least one more potential interviewee, and so on, with the sampling growing like a rolling snowball if more than one referral per interviewee is provided. Finding the right people at the right time is crucial in collecting data that is usable, viable, and valuable. Identified participants completed the ALS program in different academic years. It has purposefully sampled ALS completers from various communities in Apayao province, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, age, educational background, abilities, and geographic location. Participants were selected based on their rich narratives and experiences within the ALS Program.

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is to attempt to access the thoughts and feelings of participants. In addition, the interviewer, recorder, transcriber, translator, and encoder were among the roles played by the researcher during the study. To reach more profound levels of understanding, an intelligent interviewer asks probing questions, listens, thinks, and then asks more questions. As the transcriber and encoder, all recorded interviews were transcribed and appropriately translated into English and/or Filipino.

Ensuring the high quality of engagement and understanding between the researcher and the participants involved in the academic inquiry can only happen if a degree of honesty, closeness, understanding, trust, and openness is developed. However, it is important to highlight that this interaction process cannot be conducted without an explicit or implicit interruption of the participants' lives to generate understanding and knowledge (Maslow, 1943). This should be streamlined by emphasizing the role of ethics in this interaction process, especially since the researcher usually holds a powerful position in the scene (Bandura, 1977).

Research Instruments

Data were collected through the conduct of in-depth semi-structured interviews with ALS completers. These interviews were documented to capture the nuances of participants' stories. Field notes and reflective journaling supplemented the interview data to provide contextual richness.

The interviews were focused on exploring participants' personal stories, motivations, challenges, and perceived impacts of the ALS Program on their educational and empowerment trajectories.

Research Procedure

Thematic analysis was employed in analyzing the qualitative data collected from interviews. This method involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, allowing for a systematic exploration of ALS completers' narratives related to motivation, empowerment, and educational experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic procedure followed these steps:

1. Familiarization: The researcher transcribed the interviews and read the transcripts multiple times to become deeply familiar with the data.
2. Initial Coding: Initial codes were generated from the data through a systematic process of identifying meaningful units of text relevant to the research questions.
3. Theme Development: Codes were organized into overarching themes that reflect the study's objectives and theoretical frameworks. Themes were reviewed and refined through an iterative process.
4. Reviewing and Defining Themes: Themes were reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Clear definitions and names for each theme were developed.
5. Writing Up: The themes were written up with supporting quotations from the participants' narratives.

The coding was conducted by the researcher. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague experienced in qualitative research, who reviewed the coding framework and theme development. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality of their identities. Instead of using the participants' real names, pseudonyms were used. Moreover, eyes of the participants in the photos presented were covered. Measures were taken to respect participants' cultural sensitivities and privacy. The study prioritized transparency and integrity in data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Rigor and Validity

To ensure the rigor and validity of the study, strategies such as member checking were employed, where participants reviewed and validated interpretations of their narratives. Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing were also utilized to mitigate bias and enhance the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study aims to provide trustworthy insights into the motivational paths and empowerment experiences of ALS completers in Apayao province.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study started with the interview of the three (3) ALS learner-completers with pseudonyms: Ryan, Vhong, and Rose that eventually led to the crafting of their success stories:





THE WIZARD BEHIND BARS

“The spaces between the bars gave me hope and determination to reach my destination.”

Ryan, also known as “The-Genius-and-the-Math-Wizard”, now 42 years old, was born in Barangay Emilia, Pudtol, Apayao on September 2, 1981. His mother was widowed early so Ryan never got the chance to see his father.

Ryan was still 3 years old when his Math skills were discovered. In 1985, he started competing and winning in different competitions. His feats were published in different newspapers such as Manila Bulletin, Manila Star, Liwayway, Bannawag among others.

Because of his potential, he was brought to Manila in 1986 to be presented to the late President Corazon C. Aquino in Malacañang Palace.

In 1987, Ryan fought with the 99 Cum Laudes of the Philippines in the field of Mathematics and Algebra at the University of the Philippines – Diliman with the age of 6. With his achievements, he became a scholar of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) as he studied in Saint Louis University – Baguio City where he consistently became the Top 1 from Kindergarten to Grade 6.

At 7, Ryan was able to hold a record as a 5-time Battle of the Brain Defending Champion (1988-1993), and 3-time Benguet Division Chess Tournament Defending Champion.

In 1994, Ryan claimed that he was managed by an abusive guardian. Aware of Ryan’s intellectual ability, his guardian obliged him to do the assignments of his children. In cases where Ryan fails to finish all the tasks they give to him, his guardian would hurt him physically and emotionally. These pushed Brian to walk away... leaving his shuttered dreams behind.

At 13, Ryan stayed in Pampanga. With no family to run to, he faced his miserable life alone. He lived with criminals, stole to live, and did other unlawful acts to survive.

When he turned 14, he worked as a construction worker in Parañaque where he killed a fellow worker. He was detained at the National Training School for Boys (NTSB) in Camp General Mateo M. Capinpin in Tanay, Rizal. He continued his studies in the said school, and became the Top 1.

He did not finish his secondary education at the NTSB because he went out from the school earlier than his graduation year.

Ryan’s life was full of U-turns. In 1999, he went back to Pampanga and embraced his old and miserable life. He founded a Fraternity and was involved in many crimes. Again, on December 31, 1999, he shot two men dead. The victims happened to be relatives of a well-known politician in Pampanga. Ryan celebrated his New Years behind bars at the National Bilibid Prison (NBP) for 5 years.

In 2011, Ryan was released from the NBP. Since he did not finish his secondary education, he was never hired by any of the companies he applied in. This made him decide to go back to Apayao. Last 2014, he got married and started living a good life with his family, but he was detained again for a crime that, according to him, he did not do. While he was inside the Sta. Marcela Provincial Jail in Sta. Marcela, Apayao, he enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) of Sta. Marcela District. He was so thankful to the Provincial Jail Guards for allowing the ALS teachers to teach the detainees inside the jail. Ryan grabbed the opportunity and made sure that the chance given to him will not be wasted.

Again, his diligence was tested when the Sta. Marcela Provincial Jail was closed, and all detainees were transferred at the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology (BJMP) in Luna, Apayao.

Ryan will never forget the sacrifices of his risk-taking ALS teachers who patiently drove their way to BJMP-Luna once or twice a week just to visit and teach him and his fellow learners. In return, he helped his fellow detainees with their studies.

Last September 8, 2017, he and some other detainees represented Sta. Marcela District in the 2017 ALS Festival conducted by the DepEd Schools Division of Apayao at the Aliwa Gymnasium in San Isidro Sur, Luna, Apayao. He victoriously bagged 1 bronze, 1 silver and 3 gold medals during the ALS Festival. That same day, when they went back in BJMP-Luna, he was recognized as the Most Active Inmate by the Provincial Jail Guards. He and other detainees were so thankful to DepEd Apayao and to BJMP-Luna for letting them participate in the ALS Festival. All of them kept on saying that it does not matter if they win or loss. The most important thing is that, even when they are being detained, they were still given the chance to see the world outside the jail after years of imprisonment.

In 2018, Ryan passed the ALS Accreditation and Equivalency Test, and attended his Graduation Rites at the Sta. Marcela Gymnasium in Sta. Marcela, Apayao last April 26, 2018.

During his Graduation Day, Brian was tasked to deliver his testimony and he said, “To all people whose dreams were crushed by unfavorable circumstances, don’t lose hope. Be determined and never give up. When we fail, giving ourselves time to rest is never a weakness. In time of adversities, ALS is always there. ALS taught me to change my direction. ALS brought back my confidence and encouraged me to focus on the brighter side of life. I might have not finished my studies on time but, by God’s grace and by the perseverance of my ALS teachers, I was able to finish it with unexpected good results.”

When Ryan went out from jail in 2018, he said, “I have always wanted to earn a College Degree however I am not financially capable. Meantime, I will work and focus on my family.” He further stated, “Finding a permanent job for an ex-convicted person like me is almost impossible. A lesson that I will always carry throughout my life is that people will never be treated fairly by the society. Judgements will always haunt us. And, despite the victories and successes I had, I still consider myself the Wizard Behind Bars”



“MYSTERY” IS MY LAST NAME”

Twenty-six-year-old Vhong Crisostomo of Paddaoan, Conner, Apayao firmly believes that soon, someday, he will find the surname that would complete his name.

Vhong works as a Security Guard in in one of the banks in Apayao. He passed the Alternative Learning System – Accreditation and Equivalency Test (ALS-A&E Test) in 2016 under the tutelage of the ALS teachers of Northern Conner District of the Schools Division of Apayao.

Passing the ALS A&E Test opened doors for employment and opportunities to understand and accept his purpose in life despite the difficulties he went through.

Vhong's mother, a single parent, left Vhong to the care of his grandparents. At a very young age, Vhong started working in the farm and ran errands for a living.

Vhong's mother had a relationship with three different men. This gave Vhong four step-brothers. She had a son from the first man. She got Vhong from the second man, and the other three from the third man. Since the first man whom she had relationship with already had a family, the first man initially did not want to acknowledge the child upon knowing that she's pregnant. After giving birth to her first son, she left the child to the first man who eventually took care of the first child. Afterwards, she went to Manila to work.

In Manila, she met another man who is the father of Vhong. While she was still conceiving with Vhong, she went back to Paddaoan, Conner, Apayao. There she gave birth to Vhong on June 15, 1998. After giving birth, Elma left Vhong to the care of his grandparents who work in the farm for a living. Elma went to Tuguegarao City in Cagayan to work as a house maid, and never gave Vhong any information about his father.

Vhong grew up in the farm. Therefore, he works in the farm every time he is not in school. He spent his elementary days in Paddaoan Elementary School where he dropped twice. First, when he was in Grade 3. The following school year, he enrolled in Paddig Elementary School with the help of a teacher of Paddig Elementary School, who took care of him but, still, he did not finish his Grade 3 there. He ended up completing his Grade 3 back in Paddaoan Elementary School. Second, when he was in Grade 5. His reasons of dropping out are lack of resources and family problem.

After some years, Vhong's mother went back to Paddaoan, Conner with her other three sons. Again, she left them to her parents under the direct care of Vhong who stood as their father. One of the three sons from her third relationship was born with intestinal problem and had been bed-ridden since birth. This scenario doubled the hardship of Vhong because his grandparents are also getting older and weaker.

After graduating from Elementary, Vhong enrolled at one of the secondary schools in Conner, Apayao. He juggled his schooling, attending to the needs of his siblings, working in the farm and working as a helper in a shop that is providing hydraulic and engine mechanic servicing. Despite the trials, he kept on working even there are times when he got absent or late in going to school.

In 2016, Vhong's grandmother died. His step-brother who is bed-ridden also died at the age of 19. All these made him more eager to find a stable job. He was in third year high school when he heard of the news that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is welcoming new recruits. He decided to get absent from his classes and tried to apply to the AFP. After weeks of being absent, he went back to school but his teacher told him that he has been dropped from their class. That teacher, according to him, was very inconsiderate and always scolded him every time he is late in going to school. Surprised with the news given by his teacher, he finally decided not to go to school anymore. After a few weeks, his teacher sent a letter to him through one of his classmates. Vhong did not bother to receive nor read the letter. He just told his classmate that he has finally decided not to go to school. The following year, he enrolled in the same school and finished third year high school. Moreover, he was not included in the list of AFP recruits. He only spent 4 months attending his fourth-year classes. As a result, he did not finish his secondary education. He focused on working and earning for his family.



It was in 2016 when Vhong decided to enroll in the ALS program. After receiving his high school diploma from ALS, he immediately took and passed the AFP Service Aptitude Test (AFPSAT) in June 2017 at the University of Cagayan Valley, Tuguegarao City, Cagayan.

After passing the examination, he applied at the AFP Office in Isabela in 2017 but he was not hired. He also applied at the Philippine Army Reserve Command (ARESCOM) in Cavite in 2017 but, again, he did not make it. Then again, he applied at the Camp Tecson in San Miguel, Bulacan in 2018 but he was not hired. He was advised to re-take the AFPSAT in 2019 but he did not pass the test anymore. Dismayed with the result of his application, with his test result, and with a lot of his hard-earned money all used up, he gave up his dream of becoming personnel of the AFP.

In November 2018 to September 2019, he worked as a Security Guard at the banks in Apayao. In September 2019, he participated in the Training of Personal Security Bodyguards (PSB) in Camp General T. Crame, Quezon City. In September 2019 to June 2021, he was hired as a PSB in Tuguegarao City.



Vhong's mother is now staying with her husband in Allacapan, Cagayan. Yes, her husband. Finally, a brave man from Allacapan, Cagayan exchanged vows with Elma. Elma decided to take her first-born son from the first man he had an affair with, and also her youngest son from Vhong's custody to live with her in Allacapan, Cagayan. Vhong also keeps on supporting his step-brothers.

Now, Vhong is left living alone in Malama, Conner, Apayao. He also visits his 75-year-old grandfather in Paddaoan. He also receives job invitations with bigger salary in Tuguegarao City but he chose to stay in Conner, Apayao so that he'll still be able to look after his grandfather. He is also planning to buy a residential or agricultural lot where he can establish a small business for livelihood. And, if given the opportunity to go to College, he is planning to take Bachelor of Science in Agriculture.

Even when Vhong already gave up his dream to be in the AFP, he still has the interest to apply if given the opportunity. His resilience and perseverance kept him thirsty for learning. But there's one thing Vhong had been longing to learn from his mother. Though he has tried asking his mother many times about his father, his mother never disclosed the name of Vhong's father. The only clue she gave is his father is a seaman. Undeniably, Vhong's name will still be incomplete, and his father's identity will remain a "mystery."



BOARDS WITH KEYS, CHAIRS WITH WHEELS

“Ang kakulangan ng isang tao ay hindi sapat na gawing sukatan ng pagkatao.” (“The imperfection of a person is not enough to define their character.”) This has been Rasie's principle as she exemplified strength and bravery in all the challenges that came into her life.

Rasie was born with Phocomelia, a rare condition where the limbs do not develop normally or not at all. This can be detected at birth or even while the baby is still in the womb.

Every day in Rasie's life was considered "fortunate" by her parents because, to them, Rasie was a proof that the Lord is compassionate and loving. Rasie is the third among five siblings.

Rasie was born on July 30, 1987, in Dagupan, Luna, Apayao. Her parents, siblings, and kind neighbors and friends served as her hands and feet. Her condition did not hinder her naturally friendly disposition. Many were delighted by her sweet smile and hearty laughter. In short, Rasie was easy to get along with.

When she entered Dagupan Elementary School, many of her classmates competed and volunteered to assist her in standing up, playing, and going places. Even her teachers were pleased with her liveliness. It was not surprising that she received awards in school, which brought her great joy.

Rasie was not exempt from the ridicule and judgment of some people. However, her dream of finishing her education and obtaining Bachelor of Science in Business Administration outweighed the negativity.

Rasie graduated from elementary school in 2001 but did not continue to high school due to a family challenge. Due to their poor living conditions, her mother went abroad when Rasie was 22 years old, to work as a domestic helper in Kuwait. After four years of her mother's journey in Kuwait, her father followed, working as a construction worker. Suerte and her siblings were left in the care of their grandmother, Lola Ninit, and their Aunt Ginadine.

The separation from their parents affected Rasie the most because she was used to their care. Nevertheless, their grandmother and aunt did their best to meet the siblings' needs, especially in taking care of Rasie.

Rasie learned to brush her teeth using her small arms. As she grew older, she forced herself to bathe and dress independently, eat alone, write, thread a needle, and more. She also enjoyed watching TV shows and reading books. Rasie also loved hanging out on Facebook.



Eventually, her parents returned to the Philippines, perhaps to care for their children, especially Rasie. They set up a small convenience store, which Rasie managed. They never left Rasie alone in the store because she couldn't reach the items, and they feared she might be kidnapped or robbed.

However, one day, Rasie's father had an accident, breaking his shoulder, which required surgery and a metal implant. This saddened the entire family, especially Rasie.

Since Rasie couldn't attend regular high school, she enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) – Luna District, with Mrs. Kristine Joy A. Naval as her teacher. Rasie worked hard to graduate from secondary school and pass the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test held annually by ALS.

While helping at the store, Rasie learned to use a cellphone. She started a prepaid loading station and an online business selling various clothes, which significantly contributed to her small business.

In 2018, Rasie successfully passed the A&E Test, accompanied by her mother at the Testing Center. A Department of Education – Bureau of Education Assessment staff member supervised Rasie while she answered the test questions. Rasie held the Test Booklet while her mother wrote her answers on the Answer Sheet.

Rasie graduated from ALS A&E Secondary Level in 2018, with the ceremony held at Luna Central School, Poblacion, Luna, Apayao.

In 2019, the Apayao-Cagayan Medical Center gave Rasie a new wheelchair, aiding her daily activities.

Although Rasie wished to continue her college education, she felt discouraged due to frequent stomach pains and trips to the bathroom, making college attendance challenging.

Rasie's prayer was for her parents' health to be maintained. She also wished to give her mother a cellphone and her father power tools as gifts. She was deeply grateful to her parents for their unwavering care and love for her and her siblings.

Rasie hoped that if given the chance, she could still pursue college, even through online classes. Recognizing that her parents were aging and weakening, Rasie needed a caregiver to assist her, especially during her bathroom visits when her stomach hurt. She also wanted minimal capital for her loading and online businesses to save money for herself and contribute to household expenses.

Jokingly, Rasie said that if someone will like her, love her sincerely, and accept her, she will be overjoyed. However, her parents disapproved of her having a relationship or getting married, fearing she might get hurt.

Rasie is one of the people who bear witness to the greatness and love of the Lord. She has no hesitation in sharing her life story to provide hope and joy to those with similar conditions and to those with complete body parts but losing the will to fight and face life's challenges.

When we reach a point in life where we feel disheartened, let us remember Rasie's story. Suerte believes in the saying, “Ang swerte ay hindi kusang dumarating. Ito ay kusang ipinagkakaloob ng Maykapal sa mga taong madasalin at may hangaring ibahagi ang swerte sa kanilang kapwa.” (“Luck does not come by itself. It is willingly given by the Creator to those who are prayerful and aim to share their luck with others.”)

In order to identify and code the themes in the success stories of the three ALS completers, thematic analysis involved thorough reading and familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, theme searching, theme review, and theme definition and naming.

Thematic Analysis

From the three success stories of ALS completers, five themes were generated through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):



Theme 1: Resilience and Overcoming Adversity

All three participants demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of significant challenges. Ryan overcame a troubled childhood, involvement in crime, and imprisonment. His journey through ALS was marked by his determination to achieve educational success despite these adversities. Vhong persisted despite family hardships, dropping out of school twice, and facing rejection from desired career paths. His story is one of perseverance and determination to overcome obstacles. Rasie exemplified resilience in the face of physical challenges, family separation, and health issues. She succeeded in ALS and in her business endeavors, showcasing her strength and determination.

This theme aligns with the Self-Determination Theory, particularly the concept of competence, as participants developed a sense of mastery and effectiveness through their educational pursuits despite challenging circumstances (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It also reflects the Growth Mindset Theory, as participants embraced challenges and persisted through difficulties (Dweck, 2006).

Theme 2: Educational Empowerment

For Ryan, ALS provided him with an opportunity for education and empowerment during incarceration, leading to significant academic achievements. For Vhong, completion of ALS opened doors for job opportunities and career paths, providing stability and empowerment despite not finishing high school. For Rasie, ALS empowered her to pursue education despite physical limitations, enhancing her business skills and independence.

This theme resonates with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as education fulfilled participants' needs for esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). It also reflects the Macro Theory of Positive Functioning, as education served as a pathway to positive outcomes and empowerment (Keyes, 2007).

Theme 3: Community Support and Mentorship

Ryan received crucial support from ALS teachers and jail guards who facilitated learning opportunities despite challenging circumstances. Vhong benefited from mentorship by ALS teachers who supported his learning journey through personal and educational setbacks. Rasie was supported by an ALS teacher and her family, enabling her to balance caregiving, education, and business responsibilities effectively.

This theme aligns with the Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting the role of supportive environments in fostering success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It also reflects the Social Learning Theory, as mentors served as models and sources of encouragement (Bandura, 1977).

Theme 4: Personal Growth and Reflection

Ryan, through ALS, reflected on past mistakes and found renewed purpose in education and family life post-incarceration. Vhong's ALS journey fostered personal growth, helping him reconcile family dynamics and plan for a brighter future. Rasie's ALS experience nurtured personal growth, fostering gratitude and determination despite ongoing challenges.

This theme reflects the Self-Determination Theory's concept of autonomy, as participants developed a sense of volition and self-direction in their lives (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It also aligns with the Macro Theory of Positive Functioning, as participants experienced positive psychological growth (Keyes, 2007).

Theme 5: Family Support

Ryan's widowed mother supported him when he was still under her custody by sending him to competitions until he was discovered. Vhong's grandparents supported him and his siblings morally and financially. The unconditional love of Rasie's family gave her the support she needed to pursue her education and start her new businesses.



This theme resonates with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, particularly the need for belongingness and love (Maslow, 1943). It also reflects the Ecological Systems Theory, emphasizing the role of family as a support system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

From the three success stories of ALS completers, five themes were generated:

(1) Resilience and Overcoming Adversity. Ryan demonstrated remarkable resilience, overcoming a troubled childhood, involvement in crime, and imprisonment. His journey through ALS was marked by his determination to achieve educational success despite these adversities. Vhong persisted despite family hardships, dropping out of school twice, and facing rejection from desired career paths. His story is one of perseverance and determination to overcome obstacles. Rasie exemplified resilience in the face of physical challenges (Phocomelia), family separation, and health issues. She succeeded in ALS and in her business endeavors, showcasing her strength and determination. (2) Educational Empowerment. For Ryan, ALS provided him with an opportunity for education and empowerment during incarceration, leading to significant academic achievements. For Vhong, completion of ALS opened doors for job opportunities and career paths, providing stability and empowerment despite not finishing high school. For Rasie, ALS empowered her to pursue education despite physical limitations, enhancing her business skills and independence. (3) Community Support and Mentorship. Ryan received crucial support from ALS teachers and jail guards who facilitated learning opportunities despite challenging circumstances. Vhong benefited from mentorship by ALS teachers who supported his learning journey through personal and educational setbacks. Rasie was supported by an ALS teacher and her family, enabling her to balance caregiving, education, and business responsibilities effectively. (4) Personal Growth and Reflection. Ryan, through ALS, reflected on past mistakes and found renewed purpose in education and family life post-incarceration. Vhong's ALS journey fostered personal growth, helping him reconcile family dynamics and plan for a brighter future. Rasie's ALS experience nurtured personal growth, fostering gratitude and determination despite ongoing challenges. (5) Family Support. Ryan's widowed mother supported him when he was still under her custody by sending Ryan to competitions until he was discovered. Vhong's grandparents supported him and his siblings morally and financially. The unconditional love of Rasie's family gave him the support she needs to pursue her education, and to start up her new businesses.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

The themes derived from the ALS completers' narratives and success stories are: (a) Resilience and Overcoming Adversity, (b) Educational Empowerment, (c) Community Support and Mentorship, (d) Personal Growth and Reflection, and (e) Family Support.

Regarding the perceived influence of the ALS program, the participants described how ALS helped them regain confidence in facing challenges and rebuild positivity in their lives. This is evident in their success stories that show resilience, empowerment, and continuous personal growth with the help of ALS program implementers, family, and community. Further, the participants described how the ALS program ignited their desire to pursue education and personal goals.

However, consistent with the qualitative design and the small purposive sample of three participants, these conclusions are specific to the participants studied and are not generalizable to all ALS completers. The findings offer insights into the experiences of these individuals and may inform further research and program development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).



Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are offered:

For ALS Program Enhancement: The ALS program may continue to provide and strengthen mentorship and community support components, as these were identified as crucial elements in the participants' educational journeys. The program may also consider ways to support ALS completers in their transition to further education or employment.

For Policy Development: Policymakers may consider allocating resources to support ALS programs, particularly in areas with limited access to formal education. The findings suggest that ALS can play a significant role in providing educational opportunities to marginalized individuals.

For Future Research: Future studies may expand the sample size and include participants from diverse backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ALS completers' experiences. Quantitative or mixed-methods designs could be employed to examine program-level outcomes. Longitudinal studies could track ALS completers' trajectories over time. Additionally, research could explore the experiences of ALS completers in other contexts to determine the transferability of these findings.

For ALS Teachers and Implementers: The dedication and sacrifices of ALS teachers, as illustrated in the participants' narratives, are invaluable. Continued support for ALS teachers, including professional development and resources, is recommended.

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