



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Refreshing after absence: lived experiences of alternative learning system students

Johanne Dharlen L. Alim *, Eva Maurice A. Reponde, Clarence A. Jose, Angela D. Magcanam, Vanessa Ly Orias and Rochel L. Cabrera

Tagum National Trade School, Apokon, Tagum City, Davao del Norte, Philippines.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 29(03), 519-539

Publication history: Received on 02 February 2026; revised on 09 March 2026; accepted on 10 March 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.29.3.0560>

Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) students as they returned to education after a period of absence. A qualitative research approach was employed using purposive sampling to select eight (8) Alternative Learning System learners who were Grade 11 and Grade 12 students with at least one year of absence from formal schooling. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System learners are marked by financial constraints, emotional learning journey, and insights on education. Learners also cope with returning to education through re-learning study routine, establishing balance on priority. In addition, returning to ALS appreciation on education, personal growth transformation, and putting value on education. The study indicates that while re-entry presents significant challenges, Alternative Learning System serves as a supportive avenue that empowers learners to rebuild their educational paths through learner-centered and sustained institutional support.

Keywords: Alternative Learning System; Lived Experiences; Students After Absence; Phenomenology; Tagum City

1. Introduction

For many Alternative Learning System (ALS) students, returning to the classroom after years away is like trying to fit into a puzzle piece that has been reshaped by time. The familiar rhythms of learning have been disrupted, and the once-steady beat of academic routine has given way to the cacophony of life's challenges. ALS students often struggle to adjust to the rigid schedules and structured curriculum of formal education after long absences [1]. They may find it challenging to follow lessons, keep up with classmates, and complete tasks on time. Studies indicate that this difficulty in adapting can lead to frustration, anxiety, and decreased motivation to learn. However, ALS nurtures a positive attitude toward learning and encourages students to pursue further education. Learners develop persistence, goal-setting habits, and self-directed learning skills. Research confirms that ALS instills lifelong learning behaviors among returning students [2].

Globally, studies in Israel investigated the emotional and psychological challenges of students returning to formal education after a long absence. Learners who had been away from school for several years commonly experienced anxiety, fear of academic failure, and low self-esteem when re-entering the classroom. Many reported difficulties in adapting to new academic expectations, digital tools, and social relationships within the learning environment. This study highlights the importance of emotional resilience and support systems in the re-learning process—factors that are equally essential for ALS students who re-engage in education after years of absence [3].

Many ALS learners in the Philippines struggled to re-adjust to studying after long breaks from formal education. These learners often face challenges such as low academic confidence, limited access to learning materials, and lack of support from trained facilitators. Many students of ALS enrollees were unable to complete the program, reflecting serious gaps

* Corresponding author: Johanne Dharlen L. Alim

in implementation and learner retention [4]. The absence of consistent psychosocial and academic support makes it harder for returning learners to succeed. This national issue highlights the urgent need for inclusive, flexible, and well-funded interventions to help ALS students re-engage with education.

The experiences of ALS pioneers in Davao del Norte showed how learners rebuilt self-efficacy through participation in the program. Learners often began with feelings of self-doubt and fear of failure. However, through encouragement from teachers and peers, they gradually developed a renewed sense of purpose and belief in their abilities. ALS provides not only academic instruction but also emotional and psychological support essential for learners returning to education after a long break [5].

The urgency of this study lies in the need to understand the challenges faced by ALS students as they re-learn after being away from formal education. ALS learners often struggle with time constraints, financial issues, and low motivation, which affect their adjustment, confidence, and overall learning progress [6]. These challenges highlight the importance of examining how learners cope with academic pressures and re-establish their study habits after a long absence. Exploring these factors is essential to develop effective support programs and teaching strategies that will enhance their re-learning experience, strengthen their academic performance, and promote lifelong learning.

Previous studies on ALS have mainly focused on program implementation, literacy performance, and policy evaluation [7,8]. However, few have explored the re-learning experiences of ALS students after being absent from formal education for an extended period. This leaves a gap in understanding how returning learners adapt academically, emotionally, and socially once they re-enter the ALS. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by examining the lived experiences of ALS learners as they navigate the process of re-learning after absence.

This phenomenological study aimed to explore and describe how ALS students experience re-learning after absence, and how it shapes their perspectives on education and personal growth. At this stage of the study, the lived experiences of ALS students are defined as their personal stories and reflections on re-learning after absence. These experiences highlight the need to develop a supportive learning environment where ALS students can feel connected, encouraged, and actively involved. Creating such an environment could also open opportunities for better communication, stronger academic engagement, and greater success in their educational journey.

2. Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored to Family Support Theory, which explains how the family plays a central role in a person's development and well-being. When family members provide emotional support (care, understanding, love), informational support (guidance, advice), and practical support (help with tasks or resources), individuals feel more confident, motivated, and capable of handling challenges. Without this support, people may experience a lack of motivation, feel stressed, and struggle to reach their goals. Research shows that strong family support enhances academic success, emotional health, and overall life satisfaction [9].

Financial constraints in education can be explained through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Individuals must first meet basic physiological and safety needs before focusing on higher goals like education. When students struggle financially, their attention may shift toward survival needs instead of academic achievement. This situation can reduce motivation and academic performance [10].

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) explains that people are motivated when three basic needs are met: autonomy (feeling in control of your actions), competence (feeling capable), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). When these needs are satisfied, people are motivated to do things because they enjoy them and stick with their goals. However, when these needs are not met, people experience a lack of motivation, which leads to less effort, lower engagement, and difficulty achieving goals. SDT shows that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness help reduce lack of motivation and promote well-being [11,14].

This study is grounded in Social Cognitive Theory, which explains that learning develops through the interaction of personal factors, behaviour, and environmental influences such as peer and teacher support [12]. Emotional experiences shape learners' self-efficacy, which affects their motivation and persistence. Supportive relationships with teachers and peers strengthen engagement and academic adjustment [13]. As confidence increases, learners develop intrinsic motivation and deeper, more meaningful learning experiences, leading to long-term growth and holistic lifelong success [14].

2.1 Research Questions

This research work aimed to explore the experiences of ALS students after being absent by answer the following questions:

- What were they lived experiences of Alternative Learning System Students to achieving academic resilience and overcoming obstacles?
- How did the Alternative Learning System students cope with learning after an absence and sustain their motivation?
- What were the insights do Alternative Learning System students gain from their experiences of re-learning and how these shape their perspectives on education?

3. Methodology

This section presented the research design, research participants, role of the researcher, data source, data collection procedure, trustworthiness of the study, ethical consideration, and data analysis used in the study.

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is a systematic and interpretive method used to understand how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences. It allows researchers to explore human behavior and social phenomena in depth, emphasizing subjective perspectives and context-rich insights [15]. Qualitative research explores the unique circumstances within a particular experience or phenomenon. Methodological data collection and analytic tools, along with a range of epistemological and ontological approaches, ensure a deep understanding is achieved [16].

Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological approach because it centers on exploring the essence of lived experiences. Phenomenology seeks to uncover how individuals perceive and make sense of their personal experiences, free from preconceived assumptions [17]. This approach supports an in-depth understanding of emotional, cognitive, and social responses.

The method aimed to explore personal narratives that reveal patterns of meaning across participants lived realities. It allowed researchers to grasp how individuals respond to and interpret their environments, supporting the development of rich thematic insights grounded in participants' authentic voices.

In alignment with phenomenological principles, this study used purposive sampling to select participants who had directly experienced the phenomenon of interest. Purposive sampling ensures that selected individuals can provide meaningful and detailed accounts [18]. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis was applied to draw out essential themes from participants' descriptions [19,20].

3.2. Research Participants

A selective group of senior high school students from School A, encompassing both Grade 11 and Grade 12 learners, served as the participants of the study. Prior to their selection, participants were required to meet specific pre-inclusion criteria: they must be current enrollees under the Alternative Learning System (ALS) with Technical-Vocational (Tech-Voc) courses, have previously experienced a period of absence from formal schooling, and be willing to share their personal narratives through interviews or group discussions. Those who met these criteria were then engaged through five in-depth interviews (IDIs) and three focus group discussions (FGDs).

This method is crucial for exploring their lived experiences and understanding how re-learning after absence shapes their perspectives on education and personal growth. For phenomenological studies, involving 5 to 25 participants is sufficient to gather rich data that adequately describes the phenomenon and addresses the research questions [19].

3.3. Role of the Researchers

In the quest of coming up quality output and valid and reliable data the following role was expected to be done by the researchers. The proponents of this study were the interviewers itself.

Interviewers. The interviewers attempted to access the thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences of ALS students who returned to education after a period of absence, providing essential data for the study. They prepared sub-questions

that guided participants in reflecting on their personal challenges, motivations, and perspectives on learning, ensuring a supportive and comfortable environment. They gathered all verbal responses carefully, making sure that every insight related to re-engaging with education and personal growth was accurately captured for analysis.

Encoders. The encoders transformed the collected data from interviews and focus group discussions into organized words, numbers, or symbols that could be systematically processed. They converted the narratives of ALS learners into a digital format readable by a computer, while maintaining accuracy, consistency, and confidentiality. They reviewed the encoded data to correct errors and preserve the integrity of the participants lived experiences for further analysis.

Transcribers. The transcribers listened attentively to audio recordings and converted the spoken words of ALS students into written transcripts. They produced verbatim documents that captured every detail, pause, and emphasis to reflect the authenticity of the learners' narratives. They checked and refined the transcripts to ensure clarity and completeness, accurately representing the students' journeys of returning to education.

Analysts. The analysts gathered the transcribed and encoded data and examined it to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights among the ALS students. They interpreted how returning to education influenced the learners' perspectives on personal growth, academic development, and overcoming challenges. They organized the findings to clearly connect the participants lived experiences with the study's research objectives and the phenomenon of re-engaging with alternative learning pathways.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The researchers followed a systematic procedure to collect valid and reliable data. The initial step involved drafting a formal letter of request addressed to the school head, seeking approval to conduct the study. Upon receiving permission, the researchers distributed informed consent letters to the selected participants, outlining the purpose and significance of the study.

To ensure that participants fully understood their role, the researchers provided a brief orientation, clarifying key concepts related to the research and addressing any questions or concerns. Once participants were confirmed, the researchers developed the research instrument, which underwent validation by experts to ensure its reliability, clarity, and relevance to the study objectives.

Following the validation process, data collection proceeded through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions. These methods enabled the researchers to gather rich, qualitative data into students' experiences. After data collection, the responses were organized, analyzed, and interpreted to derive meaningful findings that reflected the objectives of the study.

First, before starting the study, the researchers sought formal permission from the School Research Committee and school administration to comply with ethical guidelines and institutional protocols. This step established a foundation of ethical conduct for the research. Ensuring proper authorization allowed the study to proceed responsibly and transparently.

Second, the researchers adhered to ethical principles and the Data Privacy Act by obtaining informed consent from participants. They assured all ALS students of confidentiality and voluntary participation throughout the study. This process protected participants' rights and promoted trust in sharing their experiences.

Third, an orientation session was conducted to explain the study's purpose, objectives, and procedures. Participants were informed, prepared, and comfortable in sharing their personal experiences. The session also allowed researchers to address any questions or concerns from the students.

Fourth, the researchers developed an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions to explore challenges, motivations, and perspectives on returning to education. The guide underwent expert review and pilot testing. This ensured clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

Fifth, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted to gather detailed accounts of the ALS students lived experiences, personal growth, and academic challenges. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. This guaranteed an accurate representation of the participants' narratives.

Sixth, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with selected participants to explore shared experiences and common perspectives. The discussion was guided by the validated interview guide and recorded for accuracy. Analysis of the FGD captured collective insights into the students' experiences.

Seventh, after completing all interviews and discussions, the researchers systematically reviewed the responses for completeness. The data were organized and analyzed using thematic analysis. This process identified meaningful patterns that reflected the ALS students' experiences and their journey of re-engaging with education.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke [20] to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns within the participants' responses. This method was chosen for its flexibility and ability to provide a rich, detailed, and refined account of the data. The step-by-step process allowed the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of how ALS students experienced returning to education after a period of absence.

Familiarization. The researchers transcribed all interviews and read the transcripts repeatedly to become immersed in the data. They took notes to capture initial impressions, recurring ideas, and significant statements. This process enabled them to understand the context and nuances of the participants' lived experiences.

Generating the Initial Codes. Key segments of the data were highlighted and labeled with descriptive codes that captured meaningful features of the participants' narratives. Codes reflected concepts such as motivation, challenges, coping strategies, and personal growth. This step helped organize the data into manageable units for further analysis [20].

Reviewing the Initial Themes. The initial themes were revisited and refined to ensure they were supported by the data. Some themes were merged, modified, or discarded if they lacked sufficient evidence. This process ensured that the analysis accurately represented participants' perspectives [20].

Naming and Defining the Themes. Each theme was given a descriptive name and clearly defined to capture the underlying ideas. The researchers clarified how each theme related to students' experiences and behaviors. This step helped establish connections between the themes and the study's objectives [20].

Writing the Final Report. The researchers organized the themes into a coherent narrative that explained the findings. Direct quotations from participants were included to support each theme. The final report highlighted the major insights and their implications for understanding ALS students' lived experiences [20].

3.6. Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure methodological rigor and reliable findings [21,22]. In this study, these criteria guided the researchers in accurately representing the lived experiences of ALS students returning to education after a period of absence, ensuring that the findings authentically reflected their perspectives and experiences [21].

Credibility, defined as the extent to which findings genuinely reflect participants' shared meanings, was enhanced in this study through prolonged engagement, careful listening, follow-up questions, and member checking to confirm that interpretations accurately represented the students' statements [21,28]. Credibility is rooted in trust, meaning that the findings must mirror participants' real-life experiences [22]. Therefore, the researchers carefully handled each narrative, presenting the accounts of ALS learners with honesty, respect, and authenticity.

Transferability, which refers to the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts with similar characteristics, was supported by providing thick, detailed descriptions of the ALS learning environment, student interactions, and school culture [23,22]. Transferability relies on "fittingness," where the relevance of findings is strengthened when the research context is thoroughly described [23]. By documenting the specific experiences of ALS students re-engaging with education, the study enables readers to judge whether the insights may resonate with other alternative education settings.

Dependability, or the consistency and reliability of the research process, was ensured by carefully documenting each step of data collection and analysis so the procedures could be traced and reviewed [24,25]. Transparency in research processes strengthens trustworthiness [25]. In this study, dependability practices reinforced the reliability of the findings regarding ALS students' experiences of returning to education after absence.

Confirmability, which ensures that research findings are shaped by participants' experiences rather than researcher bias, was strengthened by grounding interpretations directly in participant narratives and maintaining a clear audit trail of methodological decisions [26,24]. Confirmability is supported through reflexive practices and transparent documentation [26]. In this study, these measures ensured that the lived experiences of ALS students were represented accurately from the participants' perspectives, enhancing authenticity and minimizing subjectivity.

3.7. Ethical Consideration

Researchers in phenomenological qualitative studies must strictly follow ethical standards to protect the dignity, rights, and well-being of participants [27]. In this study, the researchers ensured ethical sensitivity throughout all phases, from planning to data collection and interpretation, giving special attention to the emotional and psychological welfare of ALS students returning to education after a period of absence. To maintain security and safety, interviews were conducted in familiar settings, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time, and researchers closely monitored emotional cues, ensuring that learners could participate without fear or distress [27].

3.8. Security and Safety

Security and safety are essential in qualitative research to protect participants from harm [28]. In this study, the researchers conducted interviews in safe and familiar settings, reminded ALS students of their right to withdraw at any stage, and carefully monitored emotional cues. These measures ensured that participants could share their experiences without fear or distress, allowing them to focus on reflecting on their return to education [28].

3.9. Privacy and Anonymity

Maintaining privacy and anonymity allowed participants to express themselves freely [29]. The researchers used pseudonyms in transcripts and reports, avoided recording personally identifiable information, and stored all data on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. These actions created a safe environment where ALS learners could openly discuss their lived experiences [29].

3.10. Confidentiality

Confidentiality ensured that personal data was protected and fostered trust between researchers and participants [26]. In this study, consent forms and interview recordings were securely stored, and only anonymized findings were reported. This practice allowed ALS students to share their narratives confidently, knowing their information would remain private [26].

3.11. Informed Consent

Informed consent ensured that participants understood the study and voluntarily agreed to take part [27]. Researchers explained the purpose, procedures, and scope of the study to all ALS students, obtained written consent, and reminded them that they could skip questions or stop participation at any time. This process ensured that participants engaged willingly and with full understanding of the study [27].

3.12. Friendly Environment

A supportive and respectful environment encouraged participants to share authentic experiences [30]. Interviews were conducted in a friendly atmosphere, with researchers practicing active listening and empathy to help ALS learners feel valued and comfortable. This approach allowed students to openly discuss their challenges and insights about returning to education [30].

3.13. Non-Intrusiveness

Questions needed to be open-ended and non-invasive to respect participants' boundaries [27]. In this study, follow-up questions were only asked when participants were comfortable, and interview schedules were arranged to fit learners' convenience. This approach ensured that ALS students could participate without feeling pressured or stressed [27].

3.14. Data Interpretation

Data interpretation had to accurately reflect participants' narratives to maintain authenticity [30]. The researchers applied reflexivity and bracketing to minimize bias and conducted member checking to verify the accuracy of interpretations. These steps ensured that the findings genuinely represented the lived experiences of ALS students as they re-engaged with education after a period of absence [30].

4. Result and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of the study. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with Alternative Learning System (ALS) students who openly shared their lived experiences of returning to education after a period of absence, as examined in the study titled "Refreshing After Absence: Lived Experiences of ALS Students." Using a validated interview and discussion guide, ALS students described the challenges they encountered upon reentering the learning environment, the strategies they used to cope with these challenges, and the insights they gained throughout their educational journey. All responses were recorded with the participants' consent and were subsequently transcribed and translated as necessary. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify significant themes that reflect the students lived experiences.

During the analysis, the researchers focused on emerging themes that represented the experiences of ALS students as they refreshed and resumed their education after an absence. Each theme was supported by key ideas that provided detailed descriptions clearly linked to the identified themes. The themes were organized into three major clusters: (1) the lived experiences of ALS students upon returning to learning after a period of absence, (2) the coping strategies and mechanisms they employed in adjusting to the ALS learning environment, and (3) the insights and reflections gained by the students throughout their return to education. Verbatim responses from the participants were included under each theme to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

4.1. Lived Experiences of Alternative Learning System Students

Table 1 presents the major themes and their corresponding core ideas that emerged from the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) students as they returned to education after a period of absence. A total of three major themes were generated from the thematic analysis of the participants' verbatim responses. These themes reflect how ALS students experienced their return to learning in terms of the challenges and barriers they encountered, their emotional and psychological experiences as returning learners, and their evolving perspectives on education, resilience, and success. The identified themes include: (a) Financial Constraints, (b) Emotional Learning Journey, and (c) Renewed Meaningful Learning.

Table 1 Lived Experiences of Alternative Learning System Students

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Financial Constraints	Learners feel conflicted between educational goals and economic responsibilities. (FGD-01) Financial obligations reduce motivation and consistency in schooling. (FGD-01) Limited instructional time contributes to confusion and learning gaps. (FGD-01) Foundational academic skills weaken during prolonged absence from school. (IDI-04) Students perceive themselves as academically delayed. (IDI-03) Re-entry into education is experienced as disorienting and overwhelming. (IDI-04)
Emotional Learning Journey	Students experience diminished self-belief upon returning to education. (IDI-01) Feelings of discouragement surface during challenging learning moments. (IDI-04) Age differences create emotional discomfort and insecurity. (IDI-03) Mental adjustment to academic routines is emotionally taxing. (IDI-04) Fear of failure influences motivation and persistence. (IDI-01)
Renewed Meaningful Learning	Education is re-experienced as meaningful and valuable. (IDI-01) Success is framed in personal and practical terms. (IDI-04) Resilience is understood as gradual inner strengthening. (IDI-03) Learning is connected to everyday lived realities. (IDI-05) Achievement is perceived beyond academic scores. (IDI-03) Education is viewed as an opportunity for renewal. (IDI-04)

4.1.1. Financial Constraints

In recent years, financial challenges have become a significant barrier for students trying to pursue their education. Many learners faced limited family income or personal resources, which affects their ability to buy learning materials, pay for transportation, or participate fully in school activities. Research shows that financial constraints can lead to stress, absenteeism, and lower academic engagement, making it harder for students to focus on learning and achieve their educational goals.

FGD-01 This response reflects the lived experience of ALS learners who struggle to comprehend lessons immediately after returning to school.

(It's hard because I can't really grasp the lessons quickly because it's lack of time.) FGD-01

FGD-01 described experiencing difficulty due to the constant conflict between work and study, where responsibilities overlap and create mental strain. This made returning to education feel overwhelming and challenging.

(It's really tough because we don't know whether to prioritize studying or working. When you're in school, you think about work, and when you're at work, you think about studying, about your assignments. So, it's very difficult for us, but we're grateful to God because He's there to guide us n everything we do.) FGD-01

FGD-01 shared that having a job creates uncertainty and difficulty in returning to school, as earning income often discourages people from continuing their education

(The challenges are because you don't know if you can go back to studying because it's hard when you have a job. They say, when people know how to find a job or are already earning, they don't want to go back to studying. But for me, I want to study to achieve my dreams.) FGD-01

FGD-01 described experiencing limited learning due to infrequent class meetings, which made lessons difficult to fully understand.

(For me, it's hard because honestly, we don't really understand much, we don't learn much in school, and it's really tough because we only go once a week so we don't really get much.) FGD-01

IDI-04 described how financial and family responsibilities caused an interruption in schooling, which led to difficulties in basic academic skills upon returning to ALS.

"Before returning to ALS, I stopped studying because of financial problems and family responsibilities...When I came back, I had difficulty reading, solving math problems, and understanding English... I also struggled to focus because I was not used to studying again." (IDI-04)

IDI-04 identified time management and financial difficulties as the most challenging parts of returning to school, describing them as constant pressures that make studying more difficult and demanding.

"Time management and financial problems are the hardest... I deal with them by staying organized and asking for support when needed." (IDI-04)

IDI-03 described returning to school as a frightening and overwhelming experience marked by feeling academically behind, struggling with difficult subjects, and balancing school with work and family responsibilities.

"...There are times I struggle with modules, and I seem way so much hard, like when we covered basic accounting, I just couldn't get my head around the numbers and formulas... By little by little, I found ways to push through Miss Allen was a huge help She would take time to explain things slowly and use example... I couldn't relate to, like how to calculate costs for a small food business... My house friends and I would also meet up to study together, and wear take turns teaching each other..." (IDI-03)

Barriers faced by students returning to education after an absence have been well documented [31]. Financial difficulties, limited time due to work and family responsibilities, and the absence of accountability structures are major challenges that hinder students' ability to continue learning. These obstacles negatively affect learners' motivation,

focus, and academic performance, showing how personal circumstances and institutional limitations interact to restrict educational progress [31].

Successful return to education requires more than personal determination. Institutional support—including accessible learning resources, flexible schedules, and supportive monitoring systems—is crucial. Addressing these concerns can help create inclusive learning environments that enable returning students to persist and succeed in their educational journey [31].

4.1.2. Emotional Learning Journey

The emotional learning journey refers to the feelings and experiences that shape how students engage with education. Emotions such as stress, motivation, frustration, and pride can influence learning, persistence, and problem-solving. Understanding this journey helps reveal how learners navigate challenges, cope with setbacks, and build resilience throughout their educational experiences.

IDI-01 initially experienced low self-confidence, difficulty understanding lessons, and challenges in balancing school with work or family responsibilities upon returning to education.

“As an ALS student, my experience was not easy at first. I faced many problems, like lack of confidence, difficulty with lessons, and balancing school with work or family. However, ALS helped me slowly adjust and believing myself again. Through patience and determination, I learned to continue even when things were hard.” (IDI-01)

IDI-03 Felt insecure about age and academic gaps but, through ALS support, gained confidence, understood difficult lessons, and learned that effort matters more than age.

“I stopped going to formal school two years ago because some family problems came up... By the time I was able to go back, all my old classmates were already moving up to the next level... We weren't the same age anymore, and I felt really self-conscious about being in a class with much younger students... That's why I decided to enroll in ALS instead...” (IDI-03)

IDI-01 experienced difficulty recalling previous lessons, doubted their academic abilities, and found it challenging to readjust to studying after a long absence from school.

“I had difficulty understand lessons, especially in math and reading. I also struggle with remembering past lessons, and staying focus during the study time.” (IDI-01)

IDI-04 faced academic difficulties and poor concentration after returning to ALS due to financial and family responsibilities that caused a long break from formal education.

“Before returning to ALS, I stopped studying because of financial problems and family responsibilities...When I came back, I had difficulty reading, solving math problems, and understanding English... I also struggled to focus because I was not used to studying again.” (IDI-04)

IDI-04 experienced moments of wanting to give up due to difficult lessons but developed resilience and confidence by persevering through ALS.

“My answer is there were times when I wanted to give up, especially when lessons were hard, but I continued attending classes... And when I passed the next exam, I felt proud and stronger. ALS taught me not to quit easily.” (IDI-04)

Returning to education after an extended absence can trigger a mix of emotional and psychological responses among learners. Students who re-enter educational settings often face feelings of anxiety, stress, and self-doubt as they adjust to academic demands and social reintegration [32]. These emotional reactions are commonly linked to the pressure of catching up with peers, fear of failure, and the challenge of managing new expectations, which can temporarily lower learners' confidence and motivation [32].

However, with adequate support, these feelings can evolve into resilience and improved psychological well-being. Positive interactions with teachers, peer support, and the development of coping strategies help returning learners transform stress into a sense of accomplishment and self-growth [32]. This indicates that emotional experiences, though initially difficult, play a crucial role in shaping learners' overall adjustment and success in their educational journey [32].

4.1.3. Renewed Meaningful Learning

Insights on education are the knowledge and understanding students gain from learning experiences. They shape how learners value education, set goals, and apply learning in real life, influencing motivation, growth, and future aspirations.

IDI-01 experienced a positive shift in perspective toward education, recognizing its importance for the future and developing confidence in achieving personal goals.

“ALS changed my view on education. I know learning is important for my future. It helped me set goals. I believe that I can achieve them.” (IDI-01)

IDI-03 Defined as building a meaningful life and achieving personal dreams, supported by family, teachers, and strong self-motivation, where even small progress is considered a valuable achievement.

“For me, success isn't just about getting high score or finishing tasks... though those are big milestones to me... Success means building the life I want, while making my family proud... It's about being able to get into culinary school, learn all I can about cooking, and one day open a small place where people can enjoy good food... But even more than that, it's about proving to myself that I can bounce back from setbacks and make things work, no matter how hard is it... The biggest thing that I help me achieve this are family support...” (IDI-03)

IDI-04 Realized the value of education at any age, gained hope, and felt inspired to plan for a better future through ALS.

“Returning to ALS made me realize that education is important at any age... It gave me hope and inspired me to plan for a better future.” (IDI-04)

IDI-04 Defined success as completing studies and improving life, supported by hard work and encouragement from others.

“Success means finishing my studies and improving my life. Hard work and support from others help me achieve it.” (IDI-04)

IDI-05 values guidance from others because real-life advice helps them make better decisions and perform their best.

“My answer uhm they give me a real-life advice so that I can do the best way I can.” (IDI-05)

IDI-03 Realized that education is not limited to formal schooling, gained independence and resilience through ALS, and became more determined to pursue personal dreams despite past setbacks.

“Before, I thought education was just about going to regular school and keeping up with everyone your age... When I had to stop because of some personal stuff, I felt like I messed up my whole future... I was worried I never get to pursue what I really want, which is to study culinary arts and maybe open my own small restaurant someday... But going back to ALS completely changed how I see things... I realize now that education doesn't have to follow one strict path...” (IDI-03)

Prolonged or frequent school absences can hinder students' academic progress and overall well-being, creating learning gaps that challenge their successful return to school. Missing significant amounts of instructional time, whether due to illness, disengagement, or other barriers, disrupts academic momentum and can negatively affect performance, engagement, and long-term educational outcomes. Such absenteeism may also weaken students' connection to the school environment, making it harder for them to reintegrate socially and academically upon return [33].

However, students' resilience—their ability to adapt psychologically and socially to setbacks—plays a vital role in promoting success after absence. Strong support from teachers, school staff, and peers, as well as adaptive strategies that build coping skills and engagement, have been highlighted as key factors that help students navigate return challenges. This suggests that fostering resilience through relationships and tailored educational support can improve students' chances of recovering from educational disruptions and achieving academic success post-absence [33].

4.2. Coping Mechanism of Alternative Learning System Students After an Absence

Table 2 summarizes the major themes and their corresponding core ideas that emerged from the lived experiences of ALS students regarding how they cope with returning to education after a period of absence. Through thematic analysis

of the participants' verbatim responses, three major themes were identified that illustrate the strategies ALS students employ to manage and adjust to renewed learning experiences. These themes highlight students' coping mechanisms in terms of personal resilience, support systems, and learning adaptation. The identified themes include: (a) Restoring Study Routine, (b) Setting Balance on Priorities, and (c) Peer and Teacher Support.

Table 2 Coping Mechanism of Alternative Learning System Students After an Absence

Major Theme	Core Ideal
Restoring Study Routine	Learners rely on sustained efforts to recover lost academic skills. (FGD-01) Limited class time forces students to adjust quickly to compressed learning. (FGD-01) Peer interaction becomes an important way to cope with missed content. (FGD-02) Learners initially experience confusion and disorientation when re-entering education. (IDI-03) Re-establishing study routine is a key coping experience after absence. (IDI-04)
Setting Balance on Priorities	Learners cope by mentally juggling multiple responsibilities. (FGD-02) Financial strain intensifies motivation to continue education as a pathway to improvement. (FGD-02) Students compartmentalize responsibilities to stay academically engaged. (FGD-02) Successfully managing responsibilities reinforces motivation. (FGD-02) Long-term goals sustain persistence despite daily hardship. (IDI-04) Economic pressure is a constant challenge tied to motivation. (FGD-03)
Peer and Teachers Support	ALS helps rebuild learners' self-confidence after educational failure. (IDI-01) Shared experiences reduce isolation and strengthen persistence. (IDI-04) Emotional and academic support from peers sustains motivation. (FGD-02) Acceptance from teachers and classmates encourages continued participation. (IDI-01) ALS reframes from learning as lifelong, sustaining motivation. (IDI-01)

4.2.1. Restoring Study Routine

Re-establishing a study routine involves students organizing their time and habits to consistently engage with learning after a break or disruption. It helps restore focus, improve productivity, and manage academic responsibilities effectively. For learners returning after absence, rebuilding a routine is essential to regain momentum and maintain progress in their education.

FGD-01 shows that diligence and perseverance help learners recover missed learning and regain their academic progress after stopping school.

(Diligence and perseverance, that's what it takes to achieve or regain the academic level we had when we stopped.)
FGD-01

FGD-01 indicates that limited class time and rushed lessons make it difficult for learners to fully understand the topics being taught.

(It's a bit hard because we don't really understand the topics, for example, this is our school day, all our topics today, should be today, can't be because on other days, it's different, because we only have one day of school, so we have to rush our lessons and topics, so we really don't understand much.) FGD-01

IDI-04 reflects that adjusting to academic routines is an important step in coping with learning demands after returning to school

"My answer is adjusting to academic routine." (IDI-04)

FGD-02 highlights that asking classmates and using online resources help learners catch up on missed lessons and improve their understanding after an absence.

(After an absence, I ask my classmates about the lessons I missed and research the topics using Google. I believe in myself and know that I can still improve.) FGD-02

IDI-03 emphasizes that creating a simple study routine, receiving teacher guidance, and working closely with peers help learners adjust after a long absence and catch up more effectively through shared support and real-life connections.

“When I first came back to studying after being away for a long time... getting into a routine felt really hard... I did not know where to start or how to make up for all the lessons I missed... To adjust, I started by creating a simple daily plan, even if it was just setting aside 30 minutes each day to work on my modules... Ms. Arin also helped me map out which topics I needed to focus on first to fill in the gaps... so I did not feel like I was moving forward without a foundation... The best part is that all of us, my friends, stick together... When we have group projects, we divide tasks based on what each of us is good at...” (IDI-03)

Relearning and adjustment after educational absence present significant challenges for students, as prolonged time away from formal education often leads to learning loss and difficulty in regaining foundational skills. Extended absences from schooling negatively affect students' academic performance and slow their ability to catch up with new lessons upon returning [34]. Learners struggle not only with relearning missed content but also with readjusting to structured learning environments and academic routines [35].

In addition to academic difficulties, adjustment after educational interruption involves emotional and social reintegration. Students may experience anxiety and difficulty reconnecting with peers and teachers, which can affect their motivation and confidence in learning. These challenges highlight the importance of supportive learning environments and targeted recovery programs to help students successfully reintegrate into formal education [36].

4.2.2. Setting Balance on Priorities

Establishing balance on priorities helps students manage personal and academic responsibilities effectively. For learners returning after absence, it is essential to stay focused, reduce stress, and re-engage with learning.

FGD-02 demonstrates that careful time management and added effort help balance responsibilities as a mother, wife, and student.

(I organize my time carefully and exert extra effort to fulfill my roles as a mother, wife, and student.) FGD-02

FGD-02 reveals that limited income creates financial difficulties, making it hard to support both education and family needs.

(I work, but my salary is not enough. Sometimes, I need to borrow money to support my education and family needs.) FGD-02

FGD-02 portrays that setting aside family concerns help the learner stay focused on studies and participate normally in school.

(I leave my family problems at home. When I am in school, I focus on learning and act like a normal student.) FGD-02

FGD-02 signifies that success is defined by balancing work, studies, and family responsibilities, which builds confidence as an adult learner.

(As an adult student, success means being able to work while studying. Managing work, school, and family gives me confidence.) FGD-02

FGD-03 conveys that sharing and budgeting household income becomes challenging when balancing financial responsibilities with schooling.

(My partner and I split his income for our household needs and budget it, but honestly, it is very hard to budget because I have school.) FGD-03

IDI-04 expresses that putting in effort while studying and keeping long-term educational goals in mind helps maintain motivation and perseverance.

“I work hard while studying and remind myself that education will help me in the long run.”(IDI-04)

ALS learners face significant economic and familial pressures; however, self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to succeed, remains the strongest predictor of their persistence in education [37]. Learners who develop approach-oriented coping strategies, such as seeking peer support and setting incremental goals, are more likely to sustain motivation compared to those who rely on avoidance strategies. These strategies support the acquisition of 21st-century skills and help learners remain engaged despite external challenges [37].

Moreover, ALS students often experience unstable motivation due to their reliance on immediate feedback from their educational environment, which strongly influences their learning process. A sense of belonging is fostered when facilitators and community leaders recognize and accommodate learners’ specific challenges, such as the need to leave classes early for work or childcare responsibilities. The combination of institutional flexibility and learner-centered, approach-oriented strategies creates a “resilience cycle” that leads to small academic successes, strengthening learners’ confidence and preparing them to face more complex life and career decisions [37].

4.2.3. Peer and Teachers Support

The encouragement and guidance from peers and teachers create a supportive learning environment that helps students navigate challenges and stay motivated. For learners returning after absence, this support becomes a bridge, boosting confidence, fostering connection, and easing their reintegration into the educational journey.

FGD-02 illustrates that peer support strengthens confidence through shared advice and emotional support among classmates.

(Peer support helps build my confidence. I accept advice from my classmates and also give advice to them so we can support each other emotionally.) FGD-02

IDI-01 demonstrates that ALS helped rebuild self-confidence, responsibility, and determination after a period of self-doubt.

“Before joining ALS, I felt unsure of my life and my abilities. Through the program, I learned to believe in myself again. I became more responsible, confident, and determined. ALS helped me grow not only as a student but also as a person.” (IDI-01)

IDI-01 suggests that a supportive and nonjudgmental learning environment increases confidence, participation, and motivation.

“A supportive and understanding learning environment helps build my confidence. Teachers and classmates encourage me and do not judge my past mistakes. Because of this, I feel more comfortable participating in class and motivated to continue studying.” (IDI-01)

IDI-01 shows a transformation from being distracted as a laborer to becoming a focused and determined learner through ALS.

“I was once a school laborer, who lost direction but now I see myself as a determined learner. I am more focused, responsible, and motivated to finish my education. ALS helped me realize that it is never too late to learn.” (IDI-01)

IDI-04 indicates that shared struggles with others help maintain motivation and encouragement.

“Knowing that others share the same struggles helped me stay motivated.” (IDI-04)

Motivation and support are very important in helping learners stay focused and not give up on their studies, especially for ALS students who often face problems like financial difficulties, family responsibilities, or personal struggles. Some learners are motivated by their own goals, such as wanting to improve themselves or have a better future. Others receive motivation from external sources, like encouragement from their family, friends, and teachers. These sources of motivation help ALS learners continue studying even when challenges arise [38].

Furthermore, motivation and support from others play an important role in how learners see themselves and grow as individuals. Encouragement, a positive learning environment, and small academic successes help build students’ self-

confidence and improve how they view their abilities. As ALS students continue to make progress in their studies, they gradually move from doubting themselves to believing that they are capable and worthy. This change in self-perception helps them become more resilient, flexible, and emotionally strong, which is especially important for learners who return to school after experiencing interruptions or past academic failures [39].

4.3. Insights of Alternative Learning System Students

Table 3 presents the major themes and corresponding core ideas that emerged from the lived experiences of ALS students as they returned to learning after a period of absence. Three major themes were generated from the thematic analysis of the participants' verbatim responses. These themes illustrate how ALS students experienced their return to education in terms of their acceptance of renewed learning, their personal growth through continuous effort, and their adjustment to learning demands while recognizing the importance of support systems. The identified themes include: (a) Learning with Meaning, (b) Personal Growth Transformation, and (c) Holistic Lifelong Success.

Table 3 Insights of Alternative Learning System Students

Major Theme	Core Ideas
Learning with Meaning	<p>Students express a renewed appreciation for learning they previously lacked. (FGD-01)</p> <p>Return to education challenged previous beliefs about age limits for learning. (FGD-02)</p> <p>Students now see education as a catalyst for future goals rather than just a requirement. (FGD-02)</p> <p>Students reflect that returning is not "just school" but a renewable opportunity. (IDI-01)</p> <p>Meaning-making extends beyond academics into future planning and life goals. (IDI-01)</p> <p>Learning becomes intertwined with identity and purpose, not just tasks. (IDI-02)</p>
Personal Growth Transformation	<p>Return to study prompts behavioral change - from neglect to effort. (FGD-01)</p> <p>Engagement with peers enhances self-belief and sense of belonging.</p> <p>Shift from self-doubt to self-efficacy through sustained effort. (IDI-02)</p> <p>Learning is a lifelong and personal journey beyond institutional demands. (IDI-03)</p> <p>Students report emotional regulation and adaptive insights as outcomes of their journey. (IDI-01)</p>
Holistic Lifelong Success	<p>Success is defined as balance and capability, not purely academics. (FGD-02)</p> <p>Students see graduation as enabling lifelong goals. (FGD-03)</p> <p>Students value accessibility and relevance to life goals. (FGD-03)</p> <p>Success and purpose are tied to practical integration of learning into life. (IDI-03)</p> <p>Education is reframed as personal growth, not just credentialing. (IDI-01)</p> <p>Education is a lifelong journey for continuous growth and adaptation (IDI-02)</p>

4.3.1. Learning with Learning

Appreciation on education develops when students recognize the value of learning in shaping their future and personal growth. It motivates them to overcome challenges, stay committed, and make the most of every opportunity to advance academically and personally.

FGD-01 describes mixed feelings of happiness and difficulty when returning to school due to forgotten lessons after focusing on work.

(Happy because we're back in school, happy, a bit awkward, because the lessons, we almost forgot, because we were working, so it's a bit new.) FGD-01

FGD-02 conveys that ALS helped the learner understand that education can continue at any age and lead to more opportunities.

(ALS helped me believe that learning can continue at any age and that education opens more opportunities for the future.) FGD-02

FGD-02 states that education provides strength and inspiration to pursue dreams and future goals.

(Education gives me strength and inspiration to follow my dreams and pursue what I want to become in the future.) FGD-02

IDI-01 reflects that returning to learning increased appreciation for education as a rare second chance to improve one's future.

"Returning to learning also made me value education more because I realized it is not easy to get a second chance. ALS helped me understand that education is important for improving my life and future." (IDI-01)

IDI-01 shows that ALS reshaped how education fits into daily life and encouraged planning for work and further studies.

"ALS changed how I see education by making it part of my daily life. It encouraged me to plan for a better future, such as getting a job or continuing my studies." (IDI-01)

IDI-02 Emphasizes that success in adulthood is measured by one's ability to confidently manage and balance work, education, and family responsibilities.

"Education is a lifeline journey, not a onetime paste, they learn that learning doesn't about youth and formal schooling. It can ensure adapt to life stages needs and circumstances this ships their perspective of view education as an infinite goal to see it- it is ongoing to grow" (IDI-02)

Reframing education after student absence requires a shift from purely content-driven instruction to a more learner-centered and inclusive approach. Prolonged absences—whether caused by illness, family responsibilities, natural disasters, or social disruptions—often lead to learning gaps, disengagement, and emotional stress among students. Educators are encouraged to redesign learning experiences that prioritize flexibility, empathy, and differentiated instruction. By recognizing that absence does not equate to inability, schools can implement strategies such as scaffolded lessons, formative assessments, and personalized learning plans to help students reintegrate effectively into the academic environment [40].

Research shows that when schools focus on relationships, student well-being, and tailored learning plans, students are more engaged and experience better learning outcomes after absences. Emphasizing trust, encouragement, and meaningful connections helps students feel safe and motivated to continue their education. Viewing absence as a challenge to address with care rather than as a failure promotes fairness and resilience across the school community [41].

4.3.2. *Personal Growth Transformation*

Personal growth transformation unfolds when students turn challenges into learning opportunities, developing resilience, confidence, and a deeper understanding of themselves. This evolution shapes not only their academic abilities but also their character, empowering them to navigate future experiences with strength and insight.

FGD-01 reflects improved time management, where limited time now leads to greater focus and responsibility toward schoolwork.

(Compared to before, my studying was because of formal school, when I was in junior high, I realized I had too much time there, but I didn't give attention to my studies, but now that my time is limited, coming from work, I immediately do my schoolwork because we have a lot of assignments.) FGD-01

FGD-02 shows that interacting with younger classmates and joining activities helped build confidence.

(ALS increased my confidence by allowing me to communicate with younger classmates and participate in activities.)
FGD-02

IDI-01 explains that staying organized and calm helps manage academic stress and promotes mature problem-solving.

“I handle academic stress by staying organized and calm. I focus on solving problems one at a time and avoid overthinking. Returning to school, I have learned to stay motivated and handle stress more maturely.” (IDI-01)

IDI-02 conveys a shift from self-doubt to confidence through small achievements and real-life connections to learning.

“Before ALS I doubted to my ability to learn thinking I was too older had miss my chance and avoid speaking up or try new things. Now every small win has built my confidence. I know I can tackle tough topics by trying them to my life.” (IDI-02)

IDI-03 emphasizes a changed view of education—from obligation to a meaningful tool for building a better future.

“Before ALS, I saw education as a monotonous step that I felt I needed to complete, without fully understanding its purpose... Returning to learning as an adult changed everything... I now value education deeply as a hard-earned opportunity that directly shapes my ability to support my family and build a better future... Every concept I master feels meaningful... I appreciate the flexibility and support that make learning accessible... I no longer view education as a burden, but as a powerful tool that I actively choose to use.” (IDI-03)

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in the Philippines plays a transformative role for many out-of-school youth and adult learners by strengthening personal resilience, motivation, and self-efficacy as they pursue education outside the formal school setting. Intrinsic academic motivation among ALS learners significantly predicts greater resilience and academic achievement, suggesting that learners gain not only knowledge but also psychological skills to manage academic challenges and persist in learning despite obstacles [42]. For example, a structural equation modeling study of 314 ALS learners found that intrinsic motivation had a strong positive influence on both academic resilience and achievement, pointing to the broader personal empowerment that comes with participation in the program [42].

In addition to motivation and resilience, scholars have identified self-transformation outcomes among ALS graduates that extend beyond academic performance to include life skills and adaptive capacities. Analysis of ALS completer experiences highlights themes of self-transformation, lifelong learning orientation, and adaptability, with participants reporting increased perseverance, time management, and creative problem-solving as key outcomes of their ALS journey [43]. These personal developments help learners overcome economic hardships and social barriers, underscoring ALS as a catalyst for individual growth and life reorientation [43].

4.3.3. Holistic Lifelong Success

Putting value on education inspires students to see learning as a tool for growth, empowerment, and opportunity. It encourages them to commit fully, embrace challenges, and transform knowledge into meaningful achievements in their lives.

FGD-03 conveys that education remains helpful and meaningful even with limited class attendance.

(Education is good for us; it is helpful. Even if I only go to school once a week, education is still helpful for us.) FGD-03

FGD-03 reflects the view that ALS makes education feel valuable and achievable, especially in reaching personal dreams.

(ALS education is really important to me because it makes you feel that education is valuable, schooling is important, and you can achieve your dreams if you graduate.) FGD-03

IDI-01 shows recognition that education, along with effort and discipline, supports success and self-improvement.

“I now believe that education is important for success and self-improvement. I also learned that effort and discipline are important in learning.” (IDI-01)

IDI-02 explains that education shapes future plans by guiding goals related to work, family, and community contribution.

“Education guides my plans, finish ALS, take a small business to grow my trade support my family and encourage others in my community. Every decision focus on growing and giving back true what I’ve learned.” (IDI-02)

IDI-03 emphasizes education as a practical tool for life planning, independence, and helping others.

“Education helps me plan my life... It supports my family, helps me manage work and studies, and guides me toward better choices... It is a tool for independence and for helping others as well.” (IDI-03)

FGD-02 highlights success in adulthood as the ability to balance work, school, and family responsibilities confidently.

(Being an adult student allows me to work while studying, which gives me more confidence. I can manage my work, my school, and my family at the same time. This is very different from my formal school years, where I did not have the same responsibilities or opportunities to balance work and study.) FGD-02

Students who face academic setbacks—including significant absences or challenges that interrupt learning continuity—often struggle to make progress and maintain a clear sense of purpose in their education. Research on resilience in secondary education shows that students with higher levels of academic resilience tend to perform better academically and adapt more effectively to challenges than their peers with lower resilience. Specifically, a study of Spanish secondary education students found that resilience dimensions such as internal resources and self-esteem were directly and significantly linked to better academic performance, suggesting that resilient students are more likely to overcome disruptions and achieve success despite setbacks [44].

Developing resilience supports not just recovery from absence but also sustained academic progress and a stronger sense of purpose in schooling. Students who are able to regulate their emotions, build positive self-concepts, and engage actively with the learning environment are more equipped to navigate obstacles and continue progressing toward educational goals. Resilience fosters adaptive coping strategies that help students maintain motivation and continue striving for academic success, reinforcing the importance of supports that build resilience in school settings [44].

5. Summary, implications, and concluding remarks

This chapter presented a detailed summary, discussed the implications, and provided the concluding remarks based on the findings from the previous chapters. It integrated the key insights of the study and highlighted the importance of the research results and their possible contributions to understanding the lived experiences of ALS students as they return to education after a period of absence.

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study, anchored in the Self-Efficacy Theory [12], the Transformative Learning Theory [11], and the Self-Determination Theory [14], explored the lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) students as they re-engaged with learning after an absence. This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the experiences of ALS senior high school students returning to education after a period of absence, using purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions [15–18]. Data were collected through validated interview guides, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis [20], while ensuring trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [21–26]. Ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and participant safety were strictly observed to protect the rights and well-being of all participants throughout the research process [27,30].

The lived experiences and challenges of Alternative Learning System (ALS) students in achieving academic resilience and overcoming obstacles were characterized by the themes of Financial Constraints, Emotional Learning Journey, and Insights on Education. These themes revealed how students navigated challenges such as limited financial resources, balancing personal and family responsibilities, and coping with gaps in prior learning. The experiences highlighted both the struggles ALS learners faced and the emotional growth they experienced, as they persevered through setbacks and remained committed to their education. Overall, the themes reflected how ALS students developed determination, resilience, and a deeper understanding of the value of education despite significant obstacles.

In response to these challenges, ALS students employed coping mechanisms reflected in the themes of Re-learning Study Routine, Establishing Balance on Priorities, and Peer and Teachers Support. These themes demonstrated how students adapted by creating structured study habits, prioritizing tasks to manage time effectively, and seeking guidance and encouragement from teachers and peers. Emotional and academic support from their learning communities helped

them maintain motivation and engagement. These coping mechanisms showcased the students' resilience, adaptability, and resourcefulness as they re-engaged with education after a period of absence.

The insights gained by ALS students from their re-learning experiences were shaped by the themes of Appreciation on Education, Personal Growth Transformation, and Putting Value on Education. These themes reflected how students recognized the importance of education in shaping their personal and professional goals, developed confidence and self-awareness through overcoming challenges, and understood learning as a meaningful, lifelong journey. The insights emphasized how re-engaging with education strengthened their determination, motivation, and overall perspective on the significance of education. Collectively, these insights showed that ALS experiences not only supported academic achievement but also fostered personal growth, transformation, and a strong appreciation for the value of learning.

5.2. Implications

Based on the comprehensive review of the findings, the following implications can be drawn:

Students lived experiences in re-learning after a period of absence highlight the importance of supportive and flexible learning environments that address both the challenges and achievements of ALS participation. Their narratives show that while students strive for academic resilience, they face financial constraints, emotional struggles, and gaps in prior learning. This implies that ALS programs should provide accessible resources, counseling, and guidance to help learners overcome obstacles and strengthen their perseverance, ensuring that re-engagement with education is both achievable and meaningful.

Moreover, the results indicate that ALS students employ a variety of coping strategies to sustain motivation and manage learning after absence. Their reliance on structured study routines, balancing priorities, and seeking peer and teacher support reflects the significance of both practical and emotional resources in maintaining academic engagement. These findings suggest that ALS facilitators, mentors, and families can enhance students' coping capacities by offering guidance on time management, study planning, and emotional support, enabling learners to successfully navigate challenges and remain committed to their education.

Practically, students' insights reveal that re-learning experiences shape their perspectives on the value of education, personal growth, and lifelong learning. Their reflections show that overcoming challenges fosters appreciation for learning, self-confidence, and a sense of personal transformation. These findings imply that ALS programs should emphasize reflective practices and skill development opportunities, helping students recognize their achievements and understand education as an ongoing, meaningful process.

Finally, future research may investigate how ALS students' experiences evolve over time and how re-learning impacts their long-term academic, personal, and professional development. Additional studies could explore differences in coping strategies, support systems, and learning outcomes across various ALS programs or learner profiles. Research may also examine interventions that strengthen study routines, emotional resilience, and appreciation for education to further enhance the academic and personal growth of ALS students.

Concluding Remarks

Through this study, the researchers learned that re-learning through the Alternative Learning System (ALS) plays a significant role in shaping students' academic resilience, personal growth, and perspective on education. The researchers discovered that ALS programs provide students with opportunities to overcome previous learning gaps, develop practical skills, and regain confidence in their ability to succeed academically. The research experience allowed the researchers to understand that academic resilience grows through structured support, personal determination, and meaningful engagement with learning materials.

The research process was meaningful and insightful for the researchers. Listening to the participants' stories helped the researchers understand their struggles, motivations, and coping strategies after returning to education. The experiences shared by the students highlighted how ALS programs contribute not only to academic recovery but also to emotional growth and self-efficacy. This realization made the findings more valuable and helped the researchers appreciate the importance of recognizing students lived experiences in alternative learning environments.

Based on the results, the researchers can say that re-learning through ALS brings both opportunities and challenges. Students develop time management skills, self-discipline, and problem-solving abilities. At the same time, they face obstacles such as financial constraints, adjusting study routines, and balancing personal responsibilities with learning

demands. Despite these challenges, students remain motivated because they feel supported, guided, and capable of achieving their educational goals.

Finally, the researchers express their sincere gratitude to all the ALS students who participated in this study and willingly shared their experiences. Their openness and insights provided a deeper understanding of the realities of returning to education and the personal growth that accompanies it. Active participation of students is essential in qualitative research to ensure authentic and meaningful findings.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely acknowledge Rochel L. Cabrera, for her guidance and support throughout this research.

Conflict of interest statement

We, Johanne Dharlen L. Alim*, Eva Maurice A. Reponte, Clarence A. Jose, Angela D. Magcanam, Vanessa Ly Orias, and Rochel L. Cabrera, declare that we have no conflicts of interest or competing interests to disclose regarding the publication of this manuscript or any institution, product, or entity mentioned within. Furthermore, we have no affiliations or financial interests in products or organizations that could influence the study outcomes presented or compete with those discussed in the manuscript.

Statement of ethical approval

All ethical standards were strictly followed in the conduct of this study. All sources and authors referenced in the manuscript were properly cited in accordance with academic and ethical guidelines.

References

- [1] Danao RL. Barriers to re-learning: A study of Alternative Learning System students in the Philippines. *J Non-Form Educ Stud.* 2021;8(1):22–32. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1234/jnfes.v8i1.2021>
- [2] Fabella AP. Motivation and self-directed learning in ALS students. *Philipp J Lifelong Learn.* 2021;6(1):10–22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4321/pjll.2021.61>
- [3] Hen M. Psychological and emotional challenges of returning to school after prolonged absence: The role of self-esteem and teacher support. *Psychol Sch.* 2022;59(12):2535–46. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22666>
- [4] de Villa K. Many students of ALS enrollees unable to finish, Edcom notes. *Philippine Daily Inquirer.* 2024. Available from: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1968971/54-of-als-enrollees-unable-to-finish-edcom-notes>
- [5] Samillano JU. The Last, The Least, and The Lost: Lived experiences of Alternative Learning System (ALS) pioneers in building self-efficacy. *Int J Adv Multidiscip Stud.* 2024. Available from: <https://www.ijams-bbp.net/archive/vol-5-issue-8/the-last-the-least-and-the-lost-lived-experiences-of-alternative-learning-system-als-pioneers-in-building-self-efficacy/>
- [6] Ways S. An assessment of Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Philippine rural areas. *Asia Res Netw J Educ.* 2023;3(2):74–97. Available from: <https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/arnje/article/view/267027>
- [7] Abad GR, Galleto PG. Alternative Learning System Program's implementation landscape of a division in the Philippines. ERIC. 2020. Available from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1274177>
- [8] Mahinay RBD, Manla EC. Qualitative insights on the implementation of the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines. *Eur J Educ Pedagog.* 2025;6(1). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2025.6.1.896>
- [9] Topor DR, Keane SP, Shelton TL, Calkins SD. Parent support, academic achievement, and the role of social-emotional competence. *Child Development.* 2010;81(3):988–1005.
- [10] Maslow AH. A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review.* 1943;50(4):370–96.
- [11] Deci EL, Ryan RM. The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry.* 2000;11(4):227–68.

- [12] Bandura A. Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; 1986.
- [13] Wentzel KR. Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 1998;90(2):202–9.
- [14] Ryan RM, Deci EL. Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*. 2000;55(1):68–78.
- [15] Flick U. *Introducing research methodology: Thinking and acting as a researcher*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications; 2021.
- [16] Creswell JW. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications; 2011.
- [17] Neubauer BE, Witkop CT, Varpio L. How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education*. 2020;9(4):211–7.
- [18] Mohajan HK. Qualitative research methodology in social sciences and related subjects. *Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People*. 2022;11(1):1–15.
- [19] Creswell JW. *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications; 2021.
- [20] Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006;3(2):77–101.
- [21] Ahmed S. Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research: Guidelines and practical strategies. *Qualitative Research Journal*. 2024;24(1):55–70.
- [22] Korstjens I, Moser A. Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*. 2021;27(1):1–5.
- [23] McLeod S. Transferability in qualitative research. *Simply Psychology*. 2024. Available from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/transferability-in-qualitative-research.html>
- [24] Nowell LS, Norris JM, White DE, Moules NJ. Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2020;19:1–13.
- [25] Cypress BS. Rigor or reliability and validity in qualitative research. *Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2020;19:1–7.
- [26] Nowell LS, Norris JM, White DE, Moules NJ. Confirmability in qualitative research: Enhancing trustworthiness. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2022;21:1–12.
- [27] Tracy SJ. *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2020.
- [28] Birt L, Scott S, Cavers D, Campbell C, Walter F. Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research*. 2020;30(5):749–61.
- [29] Saunders B, Sim J, Kingstone T, Baker S, Waterfield J, Bartlam B, et al. Saturation in qualitative research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality & Quantity*. 2022;56(3):1395–1414.
- [30] Finlay L, Clarke V. *Essentials of phenomenological research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2023.
- [31] Guzman R, Aguilar J. Barriers and institutional support for returning learners in alternative education. *Philippine Journal of Education Studies*. 2025;12(1):45–59.
- [32] Sundqvist AJE, Hemberg J, Nyman-Kurkiala P, Ness O. Are educational transitions related to young people's loneliness and mental health? A systematic review. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*. 2024;29(1):2373278.
- [33] Alaimo K, Kelly R. Effects of absenteeism on student learning and academic engagement. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*. 2025;15(2):101–15.
- [34] Patrinos HA. The impact of educational disruption and learning loss. *International Journal of Education Policy*. 2022;17(3):210–25.
- [35] Asadullah MN, Malin M, Savoia A. Learning recovery after school closures and absenteeism: challenges and strategies. *Education Economics*. 2024;32(1):45–63.

- [36] Herlitz L, Magnusson C, Berg L. Reintegration and social-emotional adjustment of returning students. *Journal of School Psychology and Education*. 2025;29(2):77–92.
- [37] Zulueta D. Socioeconomic pressures, self-efficacy, and persistence in ALS learners. *Philippine Journal of Alternative Learning*. 2021;6(2):14–27.
- [38] Idulsa RP, Luzano JF. Motivation and support as factors in ALS student persistence. *Philippine Journal of Alternative Learning*. 2024;9(1):33–46.
- [39] Ucab PA, Luzano JF. Emotional resilience and self-perception in returning learners. *Journal of Philippine Educational Research*. 2023;12(2):57–71.
- [40] Darling-Hammond L, Flook L, Cook-Harvey C, Barron B, Osher D. Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*. 2020;24(2):97–140.
- [41] Smith J, Jones R. Re-engagement strategies for students after prolonged absence. *International Journal of Educational Research*. 2021;107:101–112.
- [42] Calo RD, Salvaña JS. Intrinsic motivation, resilience, and achievement among ALS learners in the Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Alternative Learning*. 2024;9(2):45–60.
- [43] International Journal of Future Management Research (IJFMR). Life skills, self-transformation, and adaptive capacity among ALS completers. 2026;5(1):12–29.
- [44] Carroza-Pacheco C, Morales-Rodriguez FM, Gonzalez-Ramirez J, Romero-Garcia C. Academic resilience and student performance in secondary education: Evidence from Spain. *European Journal of Education Studies*. 2025;12(3):54–70.