THE PHILIPPINE ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SYSTEM: EXPANDING THE EDUCATIONAL FUTURE OF THE DEPRIVED, DEPRESSED, AND UNDERSERVED

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine educational system has provided various mechanisms so that diplomas provided from kindergarten up to higher education may be granted to particular types of learners who for various reasons are unable to attend or complete the formal schooling track. Such alternative credential-granting mechanisms are institutionalized through various national policies. The commitment of the Philippine government to UNESCO’s “Education for All” (EFA) goals, especially in addressing school dropout and literacy rates are among the reasons for such alternative credential-granting schemes.

One of such programs is the Alternative Learning System (ALS), described as the "other side" of basic education. The ALS program combines nonformal education and accreditation and equivalency (A&E) test that grants elementary or high school diploma. It specifically targets the learning needs of school leavers, adults and other learners from marginalized groups who are described by the law as “deprived, depressed, and underserved” (DDUs). ALS classes are held in some 4,467 community learning centers all over the Philippines. How is the ALS program designed and actually delivered to meet the needs of their intended learners? What has been the impact of the program and its challenges? The data of this qualitative case study are in the form of narratives from the participant observation notes and reflection papers of 400 teacher education students who enrolled in a course on Alternative Learning at the College of Education, University of the Philippines from 2012 to 2014. In every semester, groups of students would conduct ALS classes in nearby communities and travel to one province to observe ALS classes in the countryside. There were a total of 52 community learning centers that were visited, 41 of which are in Metro Manila. The 11 community learning centers in the countryside were selected purposefully based on recommendations and being listed as literacy award recipients. Survey on the ALS program was also administered among 43 ALS educators. The narratives and the survey responses collected were analyzed to generate themes. The teacher education students reports and survey results are complemented by the narratives of one of the authors being a facilitator of an online support group for ALS learners, a consultant of the Department of Education in policymaking and teachers training for ALS.

Alternative Learning System provides a second chance schooling to marginalized learners to the end that they are able to find a better job and pursue further education. The program requires highly dedicated and multi-skilled teachers who have to deal with diverse types of learners. Reports show that ALS has not produced significant results that address the needs of out-of-school youth and adults. This
paper offers recommendations for a more differentiated approach. Inspite of the poor performance of ALS, it cannot be denied that through the years, NFE programs like the ALS has generated alternatives in making education more flexible, participatory, transformative and responsive to the circumstances of its learners. These are the prerequisites that should be sustained and strengthened to ensure that education will indeed be the “great equalizer” amidst a very demanding and extremely competitive environment brought by globalization.

**Keywords:** nonformal education, alternative learning system, Recognition of Prior Learning, Assessment of Prior Education and Learning, Education for All, inclusive education, equivalency, work-based learning, Philippine Education System

**INTRODUCTION**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 recognized education as an "indispensable means of unlocking and protecting other human rights by providing the scaffolding that is required to secure good health, liberty, security, economic well-being, and participation in social and political activity" (UN, 2002) This landmark declaration paved way to the rights-based discourse of education to be asserted by marginalized groups like children, women, people with special needs, and Indigenous People communities (Caoili, 2007; Hoppers, 2006; Rogers, 2004). These marginalized groups when denied access to education are most likely to be left behind and unable to benefit from the gains of globalization. Many studies show that globalization has increased inequality and in the equation, the educated, skilled and the mobile workers are the winners (Nesvisky, 2015; Pavcinik, 2009).

The greater premium for education in a globalizing world provides the impetus for inclusive and more accessible education. In 1990, the international development community birthed the a massive global education initiative called Education for All 2015 (EFA 2015). The Philippine government has signified its commitment to EFA goals in EFA assembly in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and Dakar, Bangladesh in 2000. The Philippines also supported the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in 2001, and the Decade for Literacy in 2003.

In the first EFA decade (1991-2000), the Philippine government made explicit the urgency of addressing school attrition through strengthening student retention measures and the provision of Alternative Learning System that will address illiteracy and promote continuing education. In EFA-Dakar, the revised EFA goals identified particular sectors like girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities to be given special attention for the provision of accessible education. Young people and adults are to be given “equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.” And adult illiteracy should be halved by 2015 (Guerrero, 2003)

To decentralized the education sector, policies were created towards a tri-focalized educational system -- the Department of Education (DepEd) is to manage Basic Education (Kindergarten to high school and Alternative Learning System), the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) to manage technical-vocational training and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to manage Higher Education.
Various Forays into the ALS World

There is a dearth of study about the Alternative Learning System in the Philippines. Most reports focus on macro issues like number of participants, funding, and assessment results. Due to the lack of previous studies and organized data of the whole program, it is ideal that an exploratory qualitative and descriptive case study method is to be used. A case study method is especially helpful in understanding the complexity of a particular issue. This study attempted to go beyond the broad statistics and focused its attention on specific practices and experiences of people involved in Alternative Learning System (ALS), mainly the students and the service providers from the government and the private sector. Specifically the study would answer the following questions:

- How is the ALS program designed and actually delivered to meet the needs of their intended learners?
- What has been the impact of the program and its challenges?

A case study requires eliciting data from various sources like observations, interviews, documents, reports and other pertinent materials. It required either a holistic analysis of the entire case or an embedded analysis of a specific aspect of the case (Creswell, 2007). Though the study utilized education sector reports, its analysis focused more on the ALS learners and their service providers who include mobile teachers, instructional managers, literacy volunteers and ALS supervisors. As part of the analysis of the delivery system, it examine the initiatives and improvisations made by the teachers to facilitate learning among a very diverse group of ALS learners.

One source of data was the observation notes and reflection papers of teacher education students. The courses Alternative Learning Delivery Systems (Educ 101), Nonformal Education: Theory and Practice (EDNFE 221) are regular courses offered at the College of Education of the University of the Philippines (Quezon City Campus). Students enrolled in any of the courses are required to facilitate classes (two to four sessions) in any ALS learning center in Manila and to travel out-of-town to visit ALS learning centers in a rural setting. The final requirement of the courses is a reflection paper about the whole field experience. In a span of three years, there were 400 papers that were collected which contained narratives about the 52 community learning centers that were visited, 41 of which were in Manila and the rest were in the countryside.

The engagement of the students with the ALS learners extended beyond the classroom. A Facebook group was created for ALS learners (now numbering 4,000) where sharing of materials and discussion of various concerns take place. One of the authors has also become a consultant for policy development for equivalency programs of the Department of Education and a trainer of ALS teachers. The views of the teachers about their ALS teaching experiences came from informal and formal interviews. In one teacher workshop attended by 43 ALS educators based in Manila, the participants were asked to write about their experiences and views about ALS. The short questionnaire asked them to describe the nature ALS learners, especially those who are working or employed students. It also asked them to write about their strategies and improvisations in handling their classes. This study made an
embedded analysis of the two groups of people mentioned earlier – the students and the teachers. The term Alternative Learning System or ALS and Nonformal Education or NFE are sometimes used interchangeably throughout the paper.

**From Non-Education to Alternative to Formal Schooling**

One will gain a better appreciation of ALS, especially its policy when it is viewed historically. One major idea brought about by EFA was the idea that basic learning needs can be met not only through the formal school system, but also through other routes like the Alternative Learning System (ALS). This program is a combination of nonformal and informal education (Phil EFA Report, 2009). Previously in the Education Act of 1982, nonformal education was considered a “non-education service” that catered to the needs of “illiterate adults” and “out-of-school youth and adults.” It aimed to 1) eradicate illiteracy and increase level of functional literacy, 2) provide technical-vocational training for employment, and 3) to instill values and attitude for personal, community and national development. With the tri-focalization of the education sector, technical-vocational training was taken out of the basic education sector and was transferred to the technical vocational sector under TESDA.

The Basic Education Governance Act of 1991 defined Alternative Learning System (ALS) as “a parallel learning system to provide a viable alternative to the existing formal education instruction. It encompasses both the non-formal and informal sources of knowledge and skills.” Through Executive Order 356, the Bureau of Nonformal Education (BNFE) became Bureau of Alternative Learning System (BALS) and its major purpose is to deliver quality education to the “deprived, depressed, and underserved” Filipinos.

The ALS was meant to address two main concerns – improve functional literacy rate and school participation rate. In the 2003 Functional Literacy Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) showed that simple literacy rate was 93.4 and functional literacy rate was 84.1. When the ALS program was introduced in 2000, the dropout rate then was 7.67 at elementary level and 8.5 at the secondary level. These figures were compounded by low cohort survival rates. As a whole there was about 11M of schooling age Filipinos who were not in school (Caoili, 2007).

Subject areas in formal basic education are called “learning strands” and couched not according to their disciplinal base but according to their “functionality.” Thus Math and Science became “Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Strand,” Filipino and English subjects are called “Communication Skills Strand,” Technical and Livelihood Education is called “Sustainable Use of Resources and Productivity” Values Education is called “Development of Self and a Sense of Community” and Social Studies is called “Expanding One World’s Vision.”

The learning contents of the ALS core curriculum are presented through printed and digitized modules. They are delivered primarily through independent learning, one-on-one tutorial and group learning sessions. As a whole, the ALS program designed is informed by a mix of pedagogical philosophies and practices – nonformal and informal education, alternative education, adult education, recognition of prior learning and lifelong learning.

**Non-formal, Informal and Lifelong Education**
Non-formal education (NFE) is an educational program introduced by development agencies to countries that were once described as "third world" like the Philippines. It was introduced in a United Nations meeting in 1968 in the context of a widespread feeling that formal education was failing (Rogers, 2004). Upon the growing “world educational crisis,” educators expressed concern over unsuitable curricula insofar as they realized that jobs did not emerge directly as a result of educational inputs (Smith, 2001). Consequently, many countries were facing a difficulty of paying for the expansion of formal education. Reform movements and development communities in the West saw non-formal education as a solution to all the ills of education in developing countries (Freire, 1972; Rogers, 2004).

Smith (2001) defined formal education as hierarchically structured, chronologically graded ‘education system’, running from primary school through the university-- in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialized programs and institutions for full-time technical and professional training. On the other hand, nonformal education is any organized educational activity outside the established formal system – whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity – that is intended to serve the educational needs of identifiable clienteles.

Informal education (InfEd) in some instances was also categorized as nonformal education but later it gained a life of its own. It is defined as a lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience especially in the workplace. However, Smith (2001) further explains that the distinction among the three concepts is administrative. “Formal education is linked with schools and training institutions; non-formal with community groups and other organizations; and informal covers what is left, e.g. interaction with friends, family, and work colleagues.”

Rogers (2004) further argued that defining these three forms of education (formal, nonformal and informal education) as a distinct system is no longer tenable because there seems to be overlaps between and among these forms of education. In other words, the boundaries are fluid and shifting. Related to NFE is the concept of lifelong learning that emerged later. It presented the ideal of an individual who is constantly learning, from cradle to grave, utilizing all forms of learning --formal, nonformal and informal. Like NFE, lifelong learning recognizes that formal education has multiple entry and exit thus eliminating the category of a “drop-out.”

Some Philippine educationists tend to hold the view that nonformal education is more than just a modality. NFE espoused by community based organizations and advocacy groups adhere to transformative and emancipatory ideology like the Popular Education movement in Latin America that was inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire (Doronila, 1997)

**Alternative Education**

Alternative Education or Alternative High School is a term that is found to describe some high school institutions in the United States that are serving the needs of vulnerable youth who do not succeed in the traditional schools. Since alternative education programs are associated with “disengaged and uninterested” learners, there is the impression that the programs are of poor quality (Aron, 2006). Alternative High Schools do not only provide academic learning but would usually
include psychosocial and vocational support services provided by a multidisciplinary team. Alternative education programs were at their peak in the mid-1990s, addressing the learning needs of children and youth who were unsuccessful in the mainstream (Kim & Taylor, 2008). The learners came from various phases of life, whether out-of-school youth, special children, or even adults.

Raywid (1994) proposed a three-type typology of alternative education based on their programs’ goals. Type I is often referred to as “popular innovation” or “true educational alternatives” because they alter organizational, administrative and pedagogical approach of the whole school to provide an engaging environment, and a range of options for youth at risk or potential dropouts. Type II is “last chance” program which focuses on behavior modification for chronically disruptive youth. It includes in-school suspension programs, cool-out rooms that are likened to “soft jails.” Type III program is meant for students who need temporary remediation or rehabilitation to address academic, social/emotional issues. It’s remedial nature. Raywid’s models of alternative education presents a deficit view or a discourse of blame on its learners. It also presents segregation as a solution, an approach that has been maligned by educationist.

Anything that is not traditional schooling falls under alternative education. Though there are many different types of programs over the globe, central characteristics are their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-student ratios, and modified curricula (Aron, 2006).

**Informal (Work-based) Learning and Recognition of Prior Learning**

There has been an increasing recognition of the workplace as a legitimate environment for learning new skills and knowledge that consequently enables workers to participate meaningfully in the ever-changing work environments. Workers in today’s complex world are expected to examine their knowledge, skills, practices to maintain competitive advantage and employability (Le Clus, 2011).

In the context of community of practice, learning is viewed as something that originates from work-setting opportunities enabling workers to acquire knowledge through some form of apprenticeship and increasing participation. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Billett, 1996). Billett (2001: 1) noted, “workplaces and educational institutions merely represent different instances of social practices in which learning occurs by participation.” Learning situated, especially in the workplace, takes much relevance in the workers’ daily undertakings.

Workplace (and community) learning can also be an avenue for academic learning. Doronila (2001) found through her ethnographic studies in five communities that four out of every five school drop-outs left school between Grades three and five, with the highest frequency at Grade four. A test of their literacy level revealed that about 16% of these drop-outs increased their literacy level for an equivalent of two to five grades higher, while the rest (84%) retrogressed in their knowledge and skills by an equivalent of two grade levels. The possibility for retrogression is higher if s/he drops out at Grade three or below. Those who said they have forgotten the skills they learned in school cited the following reasons:

- lack of opportunity to use skills learned in school in their daily lives or activities,
• lack of reading materials and opportunities for writing,
• lack of access and exposure to media especially print,
• no opportunity to attend non-formal literacy training because of work, a problem particularly true for married women

On the other hand, drop-outs who did not revert to illiteracy inspite of the fact that they discontinued their formal schooling ascribed their retention of literacy skills to:

• involvement in community activities where literacy skills are practiced and new ones are learned,
• application of skills learned in school to work and daily activities, and
• the need to learn new skills because their work and other community activities require these.

Doronila’s study highlighted the fact that literacy is not an autonomous construct but something that is embedded in everyday lives of people and the community.

The idea of informal learning emanating from the workplace, community and life itself gave rise to the practice of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The term which is sometimes called Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) refers to a “cluster of approaches and methodologies to identify, articulate and demonstrate the full range of achievements and capacities” (Morrissey et al, 2008). Such processes make it possible for prior experiential and informal learning (whether certificated or not) to satisfy formal requirements of vocational colleges and higher education institutions (Glass, 2010). Other related terms are Assessment/Accreditation of Prior Education and Learning (APEL), Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), Validation of informal and non-formal learning (VINFL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and so forth. The practice gained popularity at the same nonformal education was introduced in the 1960’s – 70’s for the purpose of making education accessible to ordinary people and to address the inadequacies of formal education (Valk, 2009).

**The ALS Program**

The Philippine policy makers coined the term “Alternative Learning System,” an expansion of the nonformal education to include overlapping concepts and practices of alternative schools, adult education, informal learning, Recognition of Prior Learning, and lifelong learning.

ALS classes are conducted in community learning centers numbering about 4,467 found all over the Philippines. Incoming learners, mostly out-of-school youth and adults, are assessed. Those who do not pass the basic literacy test are placed at Basic Literacy Program. The rest are placed either at elementary or high school level. The elementary and secondary equivalency program was initially to be delivered through education service contractors coming from NGOs, colleges and universities, foundations and other community based organizations. Mobile teachers are provided by the Department of Education (DepEd) to handle basic literacy learners. Through the years, DepEd has increased its participation in the delivery of elementary and secondary programs. Active recruitment of learners happens from January to April, although any interested individual can enroll any time during the year. Learning sessions using various delivery systems (independent learning, tutoring and classroom instruction) are conducted starting in March until the end of the year. The much awaited Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Examination, a
paper and pencil test, is administered in all regions of the country from October to December. The test includes multiple choice questions and essay writing.

**The School Goes Where the Learners Are**

The students of UP College of Education who were deployed to facilitate ALS lessons recorded what they saw the first time they entered the community. One student wrote:

> When we went to the community, I was not surprised with what I saw; garbage everywhere, kids everywhere, an unkempt community, and all the other factors that would paint a slum.

The out-of-town field visits gave the realization that ALS learning centers are found in hard to access places. There were instances that we had to end the meeting early in the afternoon because the ALS learners who came to meet us had to hike for long hours to reach their village in the mountain. In other places, the ALS mobile teachers we interviewed would report that they had to cross rivers or scale mountains to reach the ALS learning center.

The image of a mobile teacher with school materials in his or her backpack traversing rivers and mountains represents a paradigm shift in teaching. In formal education, if one wishes to learn, he needs to go out there and find a school. In the quest for inclusive education through Alternative Learning System, the school goes where the learners are. The teachers would sometimes describe what they do as a “search and rescue” process.

The ALS learning centers are sometimes found in unlikely places—village meeting hall, jails, basketball court, women shelter. We visited at least two places in the Philippines where the ALS learning center is found inside a market area. This makes it convenient for the market workers to go to the learning center during the lull hours of their working hours.

The requirement to go and find learners in difficult places poses a challenge to the teachers. They have to deal with exhaustion, bad weather, and all forms of danger. There were reports of accidents and encounters with the anti-government rebels along the way. One male ALS teacher said that members of the military mistook him for a rebel and brought him to the military camp for questioning.

**A Diverse Group**

One common lament coming from the ALS teachers is the fact that they are teaching a very diverse group – from young children (at least 10 years old) to the elderly. Majority are school leavers who had to leave to school for various reasons – early pregnancy, the need to work and support themselves and their family or to care for a young sibling, dismissed from school due to an offensive behavior and so forth. There are adults who can hardly read or write, children or youth in conflict with the law (CICL), members of indigenous people communities, victims various types of abuse, children and youth in high-conflict areas, including those whose homes and schools were devastated by a typhoon or earthquake. The law requires employers to send their domestic help and youth laborers to attend ALS classes.
The ALS teachers reported that the most difficult group of learners to teach are adult illiterates, those who never went to school or had to leave school early in life. Among the younger population, the most difficult ones, described as “extra challenge” are the itinerant street children. This group includes members of an indigenous group from the south who are commonly called “Bajaus.”

One ALS supervisor mentioned about an interesting group of learners in his district -- the middle age mothers who left school early because they married young. Now in their 40’s and with grown up children, they have the opportunity to resume their studies. Another interesting group of learners are men and women in correctional institutions. Their confinement provides bulk of time to study and thus they perform better in equivalency examinations. In some places, the jail wardens are trained to become ALS teachers. There are also reports that ALS is utilized as part of the reintegration process for communist rebel returnees and women who have left prostitution.

ALS teachers try their best to provide a meaningful learning experience to such a diverse group. Three teaching strategies were recurring in the survey taken. One is the use of informal sharing of experiences at the beginning of the session. This would inform the teacher about the condition of the learners, their current concerns and interest. They carefully consider the learners’ interests before starting to teach them the contents of the module.

Another strategy is the use of various computer-based technologies, especially video clips. This is done to keep the learners, especially the younger ones, motivated and engaged. The third one is the use of group activities which are meant to create a closer relationship among the learners. Eventually, the class becomes a support group.

Addressing the psycho-social need is another issue that was expressed by the teachers and the ALS facilitators. One of my student-facilitator wrote in her paper.

> What really caught my attention was when we were discussing local issues and conflicts because they were all scared and they felt powerless. They believe that in this society, they are minorities who don’t enjoy the same freedom as those who are “educated.” For example, they are afraid to engage with traffic policemen who do not consider their unfamiliarity with the laws. Despite knowing that there are no violations committed, they just accept allegations thrown at them…

Another said that during the lesson, he ended up giving what he called a “pep talk,” something he felt was needed especially that the students would be undertaking the Accreditation and Equivalency Test. ALS teachers share many ways of dealing with the psycho-social needs – inspirational songs, spiritual support (prayer, religious materials), counseling, mentoring.

Overall, our class field visits reveal that successful ALS learning centers are those who provide strong and holistic student support. One teacher from an NGO ALS provider shared that sometimes in the middle of the night, he had to go the police precinct to bail out a student. They complement the learning sessions with field trips,
livelihood seminars, and scholarship provision for college education once their students pass the equivalency examination.

All these attest to the fact that ALS teachers are dedicated and multi-skilled. This affirms previous findings that NFE cannot operate without such dedicated teachers (Rogers, 2004). The ALS teacher’s counterparts in a regular high school are specialists of a particular discipline. However, the ALS teacher is a generalist and should be capable of facilitating learning in all subject areas. In some cases, the ALS teacher would invite volunteers and resource persons to explain difficult lessons.

**Impact and Consequences**

In places like jails or rehabilitation centers, participation in ALS program does not only provide the possibility of getting an elementary or high school diploma but it creates new identities. Inmates would be quite hostile at first, as they were required to go out of their cell to meet my students. However as their ALS teacher would introduce them as “ALS learners” and talk about their ALS experiences, we observed a change of their demeanor. They were not longer just inmates, but learners and achievers. The prison cell was re-casted as a learning center. The learners would later talk about their experiences, their life before they were jailed, the lessons learned from the ALS classes, their jubilation of passing the A&E test. There were instances where inmates would describe their incarceration as a “blessing in disguise.”

The goal of every ALS student is to pass the equivalency test and receive an elementary or high school diploma, something that would allow him/her to pursue further education in technical-vocation or in a higher education institution, get a better employment and gain more self-confidence. The ALS equivalency passers posted the following in the Facebook group:

> At the moment, I'm taking up Bachelor of Science in Nursing. It is a bit difficult especially that I did not go through a regular high school. So I am trying my best to catch up, but it is okay.

> I passed the elementary level and I am now in grade 7. I am happy about my situation. I am going to finish my schooling and aim to be an ALS teacher or coordinator someday. I will help and give another chance and opportunity to the out-of-school youth.

> ALS helped me to remember what I learned in the past...that I thought I have forgotten. My life will change from now on.

> I gained hope that I can finish my college education someday.

> I passed the ALS exam and I am using what I learned in my work.

Actually there are very few who pass the Accreditation and Equivalency Examination. Reports show that when A&E passing rate has been steadily increasing from 9% in 2000 to 21% in 2006 (Caoili, 2007). The passing rate peaked in 2013 at 28% but the figure was not sustained in 2014. Those who fail the test have to retake the test the next year. The teachers expressed in several instances that the A&E paper and pencil test does not really capture what their learners are
capable of. They observed that some learners are doing well during class sessions and they are quite successful in their trade but they are not able to pass the test. There were recommendations for more authentic forms of assessment to determine the “graduateness” of the ALS participants. These would include observation, interviews, portfolio development, skills demonstration, site visits and other RPL tools. An official of the Department of Education said that in the first year of ALS implementation, portfolio development was used however such practice is costly and not feasible considering the meagre resources available for the program. Reports show that the Department of Education allocates only less than 1% of its budget to ALS program.

**The Most Likely to Succeed**

The ones who would stand to benefit from the ALS classes and most likely would pass the AE test are the recent school dropouts, especially those who left the school at grade 9 and 10. Another promising group are those who are already working. Based on the survey conducted among the teachers, about 38% of their learners are working as household help, nannies, vendors, laborers, restaurant workers, and the like. The recurring descriptors for these working students are “pursigido” (determined, persevering), “madiskarte” (street smart, intuitive, resourceful), responsible, diligent and more knowledgeable. They have better literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers reported that they are able to understand the lessons better and would find it easier to write an essay. They are also more polite and able to relate better with their peers. What constrains them is the limited time they can give to ALS classes due to their work schedule. Perseverance is also observed among those who are married and have children.

This piece of information affirms the fact that the workplace provides a rich learning environment for workers. It develops that necessary life skills needed to succeed in a continuing education program. One possibility for such working students is to provide alternative pathways so they can advance educationally. One teacher suggested that that they should be give opportunities to avail of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) services so that they can be admitted in technical-vocational education program. The assessment and certification process for technical-vocational sector administered by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) includes skill demonstration, interview and a pencil and paper examination. Another possibility is to waive the A&E test for the mature working students and allow them to take the TESDA certification process using various RPL tools.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The EFA 1990-2015 report submitted by the Philippine government to UNESCO showed that it failed in curbing the dropout rate and it was not successful in providing basic learning needs to all its constituents. The report shows that only 2% of the potential ALS learners were served. And only a small percentage pass the A&E test and are able to obtain an elementary or high school diploma. The results are no different from the observations made by Caoili in 2007. Many offered solutions like improving social marketing, increasing budgetary allocation and public-private partnerships. And there are some scholars who would raise the idea that the high dropout rate and low outcomes cannot be attributed to the educational system alone but symptoms of bigger and broader societal issues like poverty and inequality.
Critics would describe development initiatives like ALS and NFE as Band-Aid solutions. What is required really is structural change (Roger, 2004).

Though the numbers about participation and achievement are not encouraging, the program, to a certain degree, was able to provide hope and better opportunities to its past and existing learners. The Bureau of Alternative System has put together a coffee table book that document success stories among its learners showing that ALS opens doors to opportunities and effective means for social mobility. The 15 years of ALS experience has also generated promising practices that should be documented to inform policy and practice.

The low performance in paper and pencil equivalency tests calls for a re-examination of the program. It might be that lumping the learners in one category as “deprived depressed and underserved” and thereby providing one-size-fits all program is not the best approach. A better categorization and more differentiation is needed. Hoppers (2006) studied the various nonformal education practices across the globe and he identified five emerging types-- the para-formal, popular education, vocational and technical training, literacy program, and nonformal education for vulnerable groups. Each type has its own philosophy, curriculum design, organization and pathway towards certification. The para-formal NFE is like the Open High School, an alternative delivery mode for those who are at risk of dropping out or those who just dropped out. The curriculum is based on the regular high school curriculum and comes with modules.

Another measure is to waive the ALS high school equivalency test for the working or employed youth and adults and allow them to go through a redesigned technical-vocational (TESDA and DepEd administered) training and certification process using RPL tools. Presently, ALS learners complain that they cannot access intensive technical-vocational training and National Certificate level two because of the requirement of passing the equivalency test. This paper suggests that such requirement is to be set-aside and allow the working ALS learners to prepare and undergo the tech-voc training and certification test (which includes paper and pencil test, interview and demonstration of skills). The tech-voc training and national certificate open possibilities for better employment. This would especially benefit learners who are already skilled in their trade and whose expression of knowledge is more oral and performative in nature. These types of learners are to be disadvantaged in an assessment program that utilizes only the paper and pencil test. This recommendation is actually aligned with the new K-12 Curriculum which includes TESDA national certification level two for grades 11 and 12 students. If such certification is provided for non-graduates, then it should also be provided to ALS students. Actually the new K-12 curriculum would require reverting to the 1982 type of nonformal education in basic education that incorporated technical-vocational training component.

Finally, for the students without a regular employment, an experiential type of learning environment through meaningful participation in a community based organization and/or a work-based organization would be a better option. This would require a closer collaboration with grassroots organizations like cooperatives, sectoral groups, advocacy groups, arts and sports groups. Work-related groups like professional associations and workers or labor groups should be included. Presently, many of these groups (mostly grassroots organizations and faith-based groups)
function as a service provider of ALS. Their role is to conduct learning and review sessions to prepare ALS learners for the Accreditation and Equivalency test. This paper proposes that these organizations go beyond conducting classes and instead involve the ALS learners in taking meaningful responsibilities in the organization. Part of the equivalency process is an assessment of functional literacy practices learned through meaningful participation in the organizations.

This paper suggests that high school students who are at risk of dropping out or who have recently dropped out should be placed in Open High School Program. Youth and adults who have a regular work (employed or running their own business) should be given the option to go to Open High School and/or undertake the tech-voc training and certification. Youth and adults without a regular work will be placed in community based organizations and/or work-related organizations for experiential learning. The equivalency activities must not be limited to paper and pencil challenge exams but should include localized and authentic assessment tools.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study endeavored to examine how the ALS program is designed and actually delivered to meet the needs of their intended learners. It also identified the impact and challenges. One very palpable feature of ALS is that it serves a very diverse group of learners and yet what is common among them is the fact that they have chosen to subject themselves to educational processes that will provide them higher qualifications, something that they see to be the means to improve their lives and self-confidence as they move about in a very uncertain globalizing environment. The teachers and service providers through the years have sought ways to provide customized and meaningful learning experiences to their learners. These teachers fully understand the complexity of teaching such a diverse group and educational planners must engage with them as they redesign the program to conform to the new K-12 curriculum and Philippine Qualification Framework.

In the 60’s -70’s, nonformal education was seen as a panacea to all educational ills. However, after a decade it failed to deliver its expected outcomes and was effectively sidelined as some of its components were incorporated in formal education (Roger, 2004). Because of the Education for All movement in the 90's, nonformal education was reintroduced but was seen as the “‘poor and badly dressed guest’” at the education table, whose presence was hardly desired and who no one knew quite how to approach” (Hoppers, 2006). Now post-EFA assessments highlight the realization that access to education must be coupled with quality. There was also the consensus that many have remained unreached by various educational programs. The emerging NFE variant that is being introduced UNESCO is called “flexible learning strategies” or FLS that address primarily the educational concerns of out-of-school children (OOSC).

In the Philippines, the othering of nonformal education is not concealed as ALS is called to be the “other side of basic education.” There is still the impression that ALS provide low quality education. However, it cannot be denied that through the years, NFE programs like the ALS has generated alternatives in making education more flexible, participatory, transformative and responsive to the circumstances of its learners. These are the prerequisites that should be sustained and strengthened to
ensure that education will indeed be the “great equalizer” amidst a very demanding and extremely competitive environment brought by globalization.

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