



# EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF SAMA-BAJAU LEARNERS IN THE ALTERNATIVE LEARNING SYSTEM (ALS): BASIS FOR INTERVENTION PROGRAM

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the educational challenges and opportunities experienced by Sama-Bajau learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Tandag City, Philippines. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were obtained from interviews and observations. Findings revealed that ALS implementation was generally effective, particularly in fostering learner motivation, confidence, and positive outlook in life. However, gaps in foundational literacy skills, economic hardship, and societal discrimination remain significant barriers. Cultural barriers were perceived as less significant due to the adaptability of ALS delivery. Results further indicated significant relationships between ALS components and learner outcomes. The study concludes that strengthening culturally responsive instruction, providing economic support mechanisms, and addressing societal stigma are essential to improving ALS implementation among indigenous learners. An intervention program is proposed to enhance literacy, self-worth, and participation among Sama-Bajau learners.

**Keywords:** *Alternative Learning System, Sama-Bajau, indigenous education, literacy, non-formal education, inclusion*

## INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental tool for social inclusion and human development, particularly for marginalized and indigenous communities. In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as a parallel learning pathway

designed to reach out-of-school youth and adults who are unable to access formal education. Indigenous groups such as the Sama-Bajau often experience barriers including poverty, cultural marginalization, and limited access to resources, which hinder their participation in formal schooling (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Research highlights that culturally responsive pedagogy enhances engagement among indigenous learners by integrating their language, traditions, and lived experiences into instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Similarly, non-formal education programs have been shown to improve not only literacy but also learners' self-worth and future aspirations (Cabanes & Balangue, 2021). However, despite these benefits, challenges such as economic hardship and societal discrimination persist, affecting participation and retention (De Leon, 2022; Silver, 2021).

While existing studies have explored ALS implementation in general contexts, there is limited research focusing specifically on Sama-Bajau learners in localized settings such as Tandag City. This study addresses this gap by examining the effectiveness of ALS components, the challenges encountered by learners, and their educational and psychosocial outcomes. The findings serve as a basis for designing an intervention program to improve ALS implementation.

## Research Questions

In line with the objectives of this study, the investigation was guided by the following central research problem:

How do the components and implementation of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) influence the educational outcomes and lived experiences of Sama-Bajau learners in Tandag City?

To address this, the study specifically sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of Sama-Bajau learners in terms of age, gender, parental education, access to resources, and program enrollment?
2. How do Sama-Bajau learners assess the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) components, particularly the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) and the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) program?
3. To what extent do Sama-Bajau learners experience challenges in the implementation of ALS in terms of personal hygiene, cultural barriers, economic hardships, and societal judgment?
4. What is the level of educational and psychosocial outcomes of Sama-Bajau learners in terms of literacy, self-worth, and positive outlook in life?
5. Is there a statistically significant relationship between ALS program components and the learners' outcomes in terms of literacy, self-worth, and positive outlook in life?
6. Is there a statistically significant relationship between the challenges encountered by Sama-Bajau learners and their educational and psychosocial outcomes?
7. How do Sama-Bajau learners describe their lived experiences within the ALS program?

8. Based on the findings, what intervention program may be proposed to enhance the implementation of ALS for Sama-Bajau learners?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational experiences of Sama-Bajau learners, as mixed methods research involves combining both forms of data to gain a more complete understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative component assessed demographic characteristics, ALS program effectiveness, and challenges encountered, while the qualitative component explored learners' lived experiences and perceptions.

The study was conducted in Barangay Mabua, Tandag City, Surigao del Sur, Philippines. The respondents consisted of 51 participants, including Sama-Bajau learners enrolled in the Basic Literacy Program (BLP) and Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) program, as well as one ALS teacher. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were actively engaged in the ALS program.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The questionnaire utilized a Likert scale to measure learners' perceptions of ALS components, challenges, and outcomes. Interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into learners' experiences. The instruments were validated by experts and pilot-tested to ensure reliability and cultural appropriateness.

Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, weighted mean, and Pearson correlation, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, were strictly observed throughout the study.

## RESULTS

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	30–39	24	47%
	25–29	15	29%
	16–24	12	24%
Gender	Female	40	78%
	Male	11	22%
Parental Education	No Formal Education	50	100%
Access to Resources	Cellphone	40	80%
	Radio	5	10%
	Electricity/Internet	1	~1%
Program Enrolled	BLP	36	72%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	A&E	14	28%

**Table 2. Status of ALS Components**

Component	Weighted Mean	Description
Basic Literacy Program	3.70	High
Accreditation & Equivalency	4.48	Very High

**Table 3. Challenges Encountered by Learners**

Variable	Weighted Mean	Description
Personal Hygiene	3.04	Less Significant
Cultural Barriers	2.12	Least Significant
Economic Hardship	3.14	Less Significant
Societal Judgment	3.96	More Significant

**Table 4. Learner Outcomes**

Variable	Level
Literacy	Moderate
Self-worth	Improved
Positive Outlook in Life	High

**Table 5. Relationship Between ALS Components and Learner Outcomes**

Variables	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
ALS Components vs Literacy	0.62	<0.05	Significant
ALS Components vs Self-worth	0.68	<0.05	Significant
ALS Components vs Positive Outlook	0.71	<0.05	Significant

**Table 6. Relationship Between Challenges and Learner Outcomes**

Variables	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Challenges vs Literacy	-0.55	<0.05	Significant
Challenges vs Self-worth	-0.60	<0.05	Significant
Challenges vs Positive Outlook	-0.58	<0.05	Significant

**Table 7. Summary of Lived Experiences (Thematic Analysis)**

Theme	Description
Motivation to Learn	Desire to improve life and gain employment
Cultural Identity	Pride in identity but experiences of discrimination
Economic Struggles	Need to prioritize livelihood over schooling
Teacher Support	Strong influence on confidence and engagement
Personal Growth	Increased self-worth and hope for the future

**Table 8. Proposed Intervention Program**

Area	Intervention	Expected Outcome
Literacy	Remedial reading and writing sessions	Improved literacy skills
Economic Support	Livelihood and material assistance	Increased attendance
Social Inclusion	Anti-discrimination programs	Improved confidence
Cultural Integration	Contextualized learning materials	Better engagement
Teacher Training	Culturally responsive pedagogy	Enhanced instruction

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that ALS serves as an effective platform for promoting educational inclusion among Sama-Bajau learners. High ratings in teacher support and motivation suggest that culturally responsive teaching plays a critical role in learner engagement (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2024). However, gaps in literacy outcomes highlight the need for enhanced instructional strategies and continuous practice (Arenal & Dasig, 2025).

Economic hardship emerged as a major barrier, consistent with global findings that poverty forces learners to prioritize livelihood over education (UNICEF, 2021). Meanwhile, societal discrimination remains a significant challenge, affecting learners' confidence and participation (Silver, 2021).

Interestingly, cultural barriers were rated as less significant, suggesting that ALS has adapted well to indigenous contexts. This aligns with studies emphasizing the effectiveness of localized and flexible learning approaches (Smith, 2023). Furthermore, the program's positive impact on self-worth and outlook in life demonstrates its transformative potential (Deci & Ryan, 2020).

Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrating cultural sensitivity, economic support, and community engagement to maximize ALS effectiveness.

## Conclusions

This study concludes that the Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as an effective educational intervention for Sama-Bajau learners, particularly in enhancing their motivation, self-worth, and overall outlook in life. The program demonstrates its potential to provide inclusive and flexible learning opportunities for marginalized groups who are often excluded from formal education. However, despite these positive outcomes, the findings reveal that significant challenges persist, particularly in the areas of literacy development, economic hardship, and societal discrimination, which continue to hinder learners' full participation and academic progress.

The results underscore the necessity of strengthening instructional and support mechanisms within ALS. In particular, there is a need to enhance literacy instruction through targeted remediation programs to ensure the development of essential reading and writing skills. Additionally, integrating livelihood and economic support initiatives may help address financial barriers that affect learners' attendance and engagement. The study also highlights the importance of implementing community awareness programs aimed at reducing stigma and fostering a more inclusive environment for indigenous learners. Furthermore, adopting culturally responsive and inclusive teaching strategies is essential to ensure that instruction remains relevant and respectful of learners' cultural identities.

In response to these identified gaps, an intervention program is proposed to improve the delivery and effectiveness of ALS among Sama-Bajau learners. Such efforts are expected to contribute to more equitable educational outcomes and to support the broader goal of inclusive education for all.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, several recommendations are advanced to enhance the implementation of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) for Sama-Bajau learners and other marginalized populations.

It is recommended that ALS implementers intensify efforts to improve foundational literacy skills by developing structured and sustained remedial programs in reading, writing, and comprehension. Although learners demonstrated high motivation and engagement, the results indicate that functional literacy remains an area requiring further support. The adoption of differentiated instruction, continuous formative assessment, and extended learning opportunities may facilitate improved learning outcomes.

Moreover, the integration of culturally responsive pedagogical approaches should be strengthened. While cultural barriers were not perceived as highly significant, the presence of social integration challenges and experiences of discrimination suggests the need for more inclusive instructional practices. The use of learners' native language, incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems, and contextualization of learning materials are recommended to promote meaningful engagement and reinforce cultural identity.

Addressing economic constraints is likewise essential to improving learner participation and retention. Given that financial difficulties were found to influence attendance and continuity, it is recommended that relevant stakeholders, including local government units and partner organizations, provide support mechanisms such as learning materials, transportation assistance, and access to livelihood opportunities. Embedding skills-based and income-generating components within ALS may further enhance its relevance and sustainability.

In addition, efforts to mitigate societal stigma and discrimination should be prioritized. Since societal judgment was identified as a significant challenge, initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive and respectful learning environments are necessary. Community-based awareness programs, intercultural activities, and peer support mechanisms may contribute to reducing prejudice and promoting social acceptance of indigenous learners.

Furthermore, the provision of continuous professional development for ALS teachers is strongly recommended. Training programs focusing on culturally responsive instruction, inclusive education, and psychosocial support can better equip educators to address the diverse needs of learners. Strengthening teacher support systems, including mentoring and access to instructional resources, may further improve the quality of program delivery.

Finally, future research is encouraged to expand on the present study by conducting longitudinal and comparative investigations across different contexts and indigenous groups. Examining additional variables such as policy implementation, community engagement, and the integration of digital learning may provide deeper insights into improving non-formal education programs.

Collectively, these recommendations aim to strengthen ALS implementation by addressing both instructional and contextual factors that influence the educational experiences and outcomes of Sama-Bajau learners.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

This study adhered strictly to established ethical standards in educational research. Prior to data collection, necessary permissions were secured from appropriate educational authorities and local government units. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights as respondents. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were not disclosed, and all data were handled with care to protect the privacy of the participants. The study also complied with the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring that all collected information was used solely for academic and research purposes.

Furthermore, cultural sensitivity was observed in all interactions with the Sama-Bajau community. The researcher ensured that communication was conducted in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner, recognizing the participants' traditions, beliefs, and values. The research process avoided any form of harm, coercion, or exploitation, and efforts were made to create a safe and supportive environment for all respondents. Overall, the study upheld the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that the rights, dignity, and well-being of the participants were protected at all stages of the research.

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