

ALS Research Agenda: **Availability of Programs in Certain Circumstances**

## An Ecological Systems Analysis of Functional Literacy and Learning Gaps among Non-Enrolled Populations in Northern Mindanao

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### Abstract

A substantial segment of the Filipino population, the non-enrolled individuals, particularly those with no grade completed, remains largely invisible within both formal and non-formal education systems. This study examined the functional literacy status and learning gaps of this marginalized group in Northern Mindanao, with the aim of generating evidence-based inputs for strengthening the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study integrates data from the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), a region-wide assessment of 342 Community Learning Centers (CLCs) across Region X, and qualitative reflections from ALS implementers. Findings reveal that only 10.8% of individuals in Northern Mindanao with no grade completed are functionally literate, underscoring deep and persistent learning deprivation. Structural analysis further indicates wide variations in CLC design, resource support, and ownership arrangements, which significantly shape learner engagement and literacy conditions. Qualitative evidence suggests that these systemic limitations constrain instructional quality and learner progression. The study argues that addressing functional illiteracy among non-enrolled populations requires more than access expansion. It recommends upgrading CLCs to Type 3 standards, deploying offline digital learning hubs, strengthening LGU–DepEd–NGO partnerships, and embedding formative and culturally responsive assessment practices within ALS delivery.

**Keywords:** *functional literacy, non-enrolled learners, non-formal education, community learning centers*



## I. Introduction

In the pursuit of inclusive and equitable education in the Philippines, one of the most underserved and least visible populations comprises individuals who are either non-enrolled or non-graded—those who have not completed even a single grade level in formal education. Non-enrolled individuals are currently outside both the formal and non-formal education systems, while non-graded individuals have never advanced beyond the starting point of schooling. Though these categories may overlap, it is essential to distinguish between them: some non-enrolled persons may have prior schooling experience, whereas non-graded individuals have had none.

Often missing from mainstream educational data, these groups represent the most severely marginalized learners. The Alternative Learning System (ALS) was designed to support out-of-school youth and adults (OSYAs). However, recent findings indicate enduring gaps, especially for those with no prior exposure to formal education. Addressing their needs requires not only expanded access but also tailored interventions that recognize the depth of their educational disadvantage.

According to the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), only 25.6% of individuals in Region X (Northern Mindanao) with no grade completed are basically literate. A mere 10.8% are functionally literate, defined as having the ability to read, write, compute, and comprehend information (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2025). These figures highlight an urgent need to deliver more targeted and transformative literacy programs to reach the most marginalized segments of the population.

The passage of Republic Act No. 11510, or the ALS Act of 2020, institutionalized ALS as a parallel learning system and mandated the establishment of at least one Community Learning Center (CLC) in every city and municipality (Congress of the Philippines, 2020). However, while the law promises inclusiveness, access alone does not equate to learning. Literature shows that learning outcomes—particularly functional literacy—are strongly influenced by the quality of the learning environment, the presence of learner-centered practices, and the availability of instructional resources (UNESCO, 2023; Comighud, 2020).

While ALS implementers demonstrate high commitment, they face structural and systemic barriers (Mahinay & Manla, 2025). There is emphasis on the need for andragogical approaches in ALS, particularly those grounded in self-direction, practical learning, and flexibility tailored to adult learners. However, the study also revealed that many CLCs operate in poorly equipped venues with limited instructional resources, minimal digital infrastructure, and inadequate access to health and sanitation facilities. These constraints not only affect participation but also limit learners' opportunities to develop the higher order thinking skills essential to functional literacy (PSA, 2025).

Compounding these issues is the digital divide. Only 12.9% of surveyed CLCs in Northern Mindanao had desktop computers or internet access, despite the inclusion of ICT modules in the ALS K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum (Department of Education, 2022). These resource gaps, especially in rural areas, severely limit the delivery of 21st-century literacy content and restrict learners' access to broader educational and professional opportunities (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020; Sy, 2020). Moreover, completion rates remain low: in SY 2023–2024, only 46.2% of ALS enrollees in Region X completed the program



(EDCOM II, 2024), reducing their chances to take the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test administered at exit.

These challenges are echoed in regional and global studies, which affirm that literacy outcomes are significantly shaped by safe, well-resourced, and community-supported learning environments (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023; Bernard et al., 2014). Mahinay and Manla (2025) also highlighted the stressors associated with ALS assessments and the need for inclusive, diverse evaluation practices. Their findings reinforce that ALS success depends not only on access but on how responsive the system is to learners lived realities, particularly those with no prior exposure to formal education.

This study draws on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that individual development is shaped by multiple nested environments—from immediate settings such as home and learning centers (microsystem) to broader policy and socio-economic contexts (macrosystem). Applying this framework, the study analyzes how functional literacy among non-enrolled individuals in Northern Mindanao is influenced by personal circumstances, the quality of CLCs, the strength of community partnerships, and the effectiveness of the national ALS policy.

Given all these, this study aims to: (1) analyze the basic and functional literacy profiles of non-enrolled individuals in Northern Mindanao using the 2024 FLEMMS dataset; (2) examine the learning environment conditions of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) across Region X in relation to typology, ownership, and resource availability; (3) identify pedagogical and structural gaps that hinder functional literacy development among ALS learners; and (4) recommend policy and program interventions for improving ALS delivery based on the ecological dimensions of learning and governance. Through these objectives, the study provides empirical and policy insights to strengthen the Alternative Learning System as a pathway for equitable, lifelong learning.

## **II. Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a descriptive-analytic research design to explore the functional literacy profile of non-enrolled individuals in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Rather than collecting new field data, the study analyzed existing quantitative and qualitative sources to understand how literacy outcomes intersect with learning opportunities provided by the Alternative Learning System (ALS). The analysis was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how layered systems shape learning and development—from individual, school-level, and community environments to broader policy and institutional contexts.

### **Data Sources**

This study utilized three secondary data sources. The first is the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) published by the Philippine Statistics Authority in 2025, which provided disaggregated regional data specifically for Region X. The study focused on the literacy status of individuals with no grade completed, analyzing both basic and functional literacy rates as key indicators of educational attainment and skills



acquisition. This national dataset served as the quantitative backbone for understanding the extent of literacy deprivation among non-enrolled individuals.

The second data source is the ALS Region X CLC Report (2023), a regional assessment conducted across 342 Community Learning Centers (CLCs) within the 14 Schools Division Offices of Northern Mindanao. The report includes responses from ALS implementers across various dimensions of CLC delivery, including infrastructure typology, availability of learning resources, digital access, and completion rates. It also presents correlational findings on the relationship between CLC characteristics and learner outcomes, making it a valuable resource for analyzing how learning spaces shape literacy behavior in the ALS context.

The third source is the study by Mahinay and Manla (2025), which offers qualitative insights from doctoral students who engaged in reflective analysis of ALS implementation. The study explores themes related to andragogy, curriculum adaptability, policy responsiveness, assessment methods, and post-program pathways. It provides contextual depth by highlighting the lived experiences and perceptions of ALS stakeholders and practitioners. These reflections were especially useful for mapping the structural and instructional dimensions of ALS onto the ecological layers that affect learner outcomes.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from FLEMMS were subjected to descriptive analysis, focusing on literacy rates and population counts by educational attainment. These results were interpreted considering the CLC typologies and infrastructure data from the ALS Region X CLC Report. Previously established correlations, such as between CLC type and learner completion, were revisited to draw functional implications.

An additional dimension, the ALS Region X CLC Report (2023) and the narrative synthesis of Mahinay and Manla (2025) study were referenced. Insights related to safety, digital access, teacher motivation, and learner engagement were organized thematically and mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (e.g., microsystem: CLC environment; mesosystem: community support; exosystem: LGU involvement; macrosystem: ALS policy). This layered reading provided a more holistic understanding of the learning ecosystem surrounding non-enrolled learners.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All datasets and documents used in this study are publicly accessible or institutionally authorized. The ALS Region X CLC Report (2023) and Mahinay and Manla (2025) are properly cited with permission where applicable. No primary data collection involving human participants was undertaken for this study.

## **III. Results and Discussion**

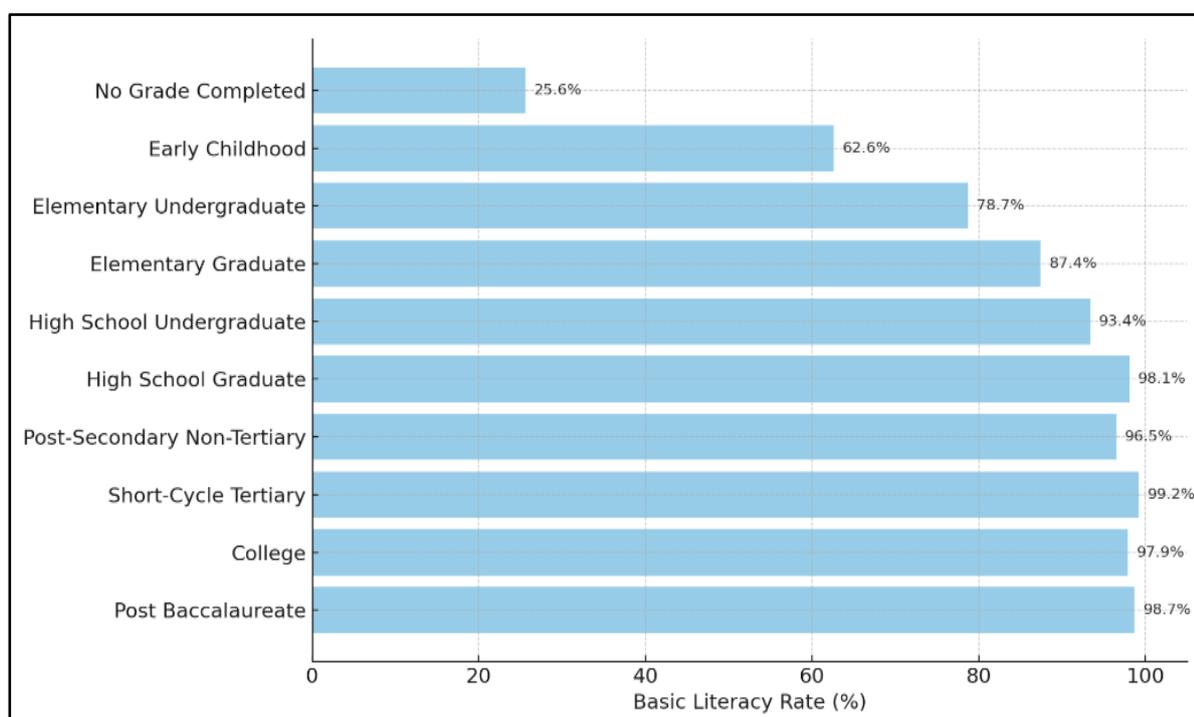
### **Basic Literacy Profile of Non-Enrolled Individuals**

Looking at Figure 1, data from the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) reveal that basic literacy in Region X is strongly dependent on educational attainment. Among individuals with no grade completed, only 25.6% are considered basically literate. This figure rises steadily with each educational milestone,

reaching 87.4% among elementary graduates and peaking at 98.7% among those with post-baccalaureate degrees (PSA, 2025).

The literacy climb is especially sharp between high school undergraduates (93.4%) and high school graduates (98.1%), indicating the cumulative effect of formal schooling on basic reading and writing competencies. However, the large disparity at the lower end of the spectrum underscores the vulnerability of non-enrolled individuals who are most likely to rely on non-formal education systems like ALS.

Figure 1  
Basic Literacy Rates by Educational Attainment in Region X



Source: *Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS)* published by the Philippine Statistics Authority (2025).

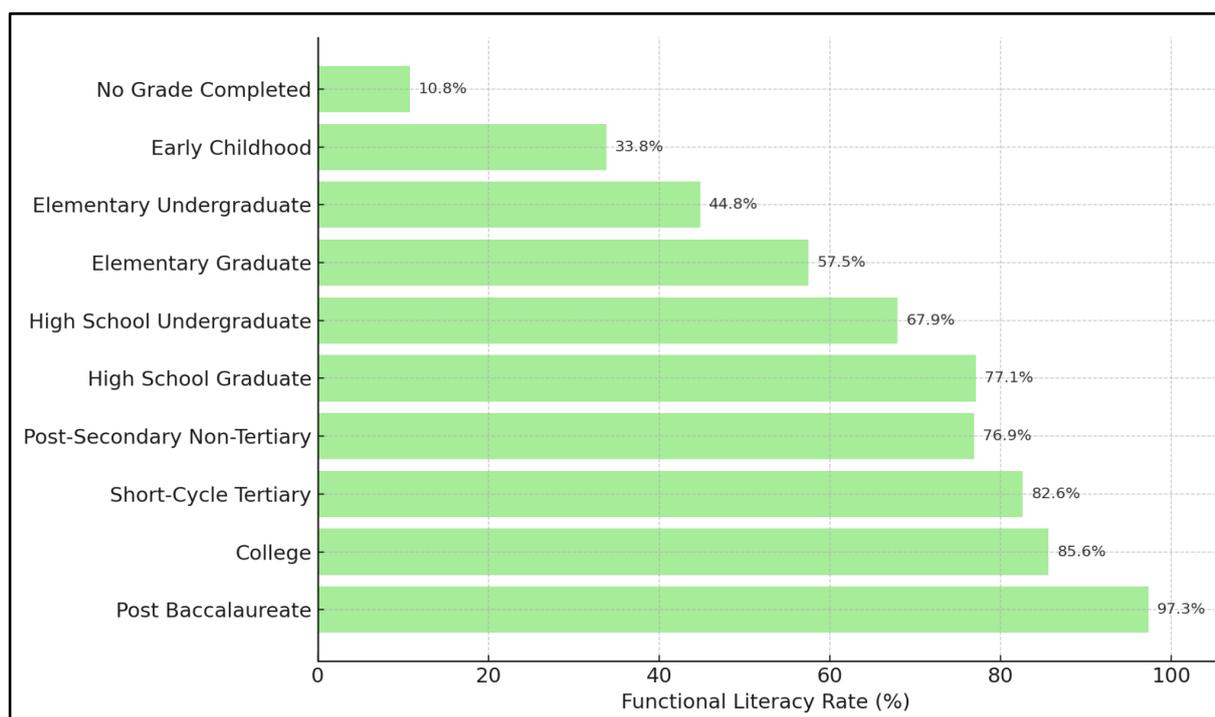
These findings highlight a key functional challenge: while ALS aims to serve individuals with minimal or no schooling, the likelihood of even achieving basic literacy remains low unless learning opportunities are intensive, sustained, and contextualized. This trend confirms the need for strong foundational literacy programming specifically fit to those who enter ALS with zero schooling experience.

### Functional Literacy Profile of Non-Enrolled Individuals

Figure 2 presents the functional literacy rates in Region X. Among those with no grade completed, only 10.8% are considered functionally literate. Functional literacy, as defined by FLEMMS, requires the ability to read, write, compute, and comprehend information effectively for everyday tasks. This low rate signifies not just a lack of schooling but a lack of exposure to real-world literacy practice.

The data further show that, even among elementary graduates, only 57.5% attain functional literacy, whereas it is not until high school completion that a significant majority (77.1%) reaches this threshold. Full functional literacy is nearly universal (97.3%) only at the post-baccalaureate level. These figures suggest that without formal, extended learning pathways, developing the full spectrum of functional skills is unlikely.

Figure 2  
Functional Literacy Rates by Educational Attainment in Region X



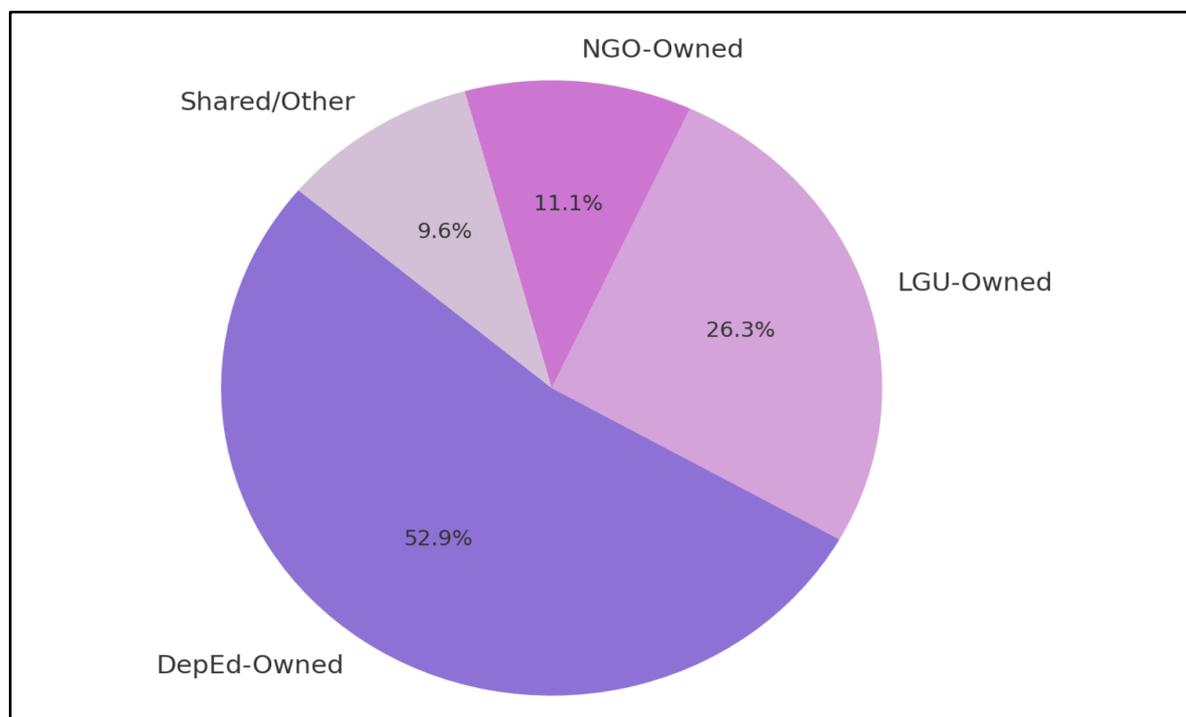
Source: *Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS)* published by the Philippine Statistics Authority (2025).

These low functional literacy rates among non-enrolled learners carry direct implications for ALS design. Learners with no grade completed are not just behind in academic content; they also face compounded deficits in cognitive strategies like inference-making, numerical estimation, and document reading. Without targeted interventions—both andragogical and environmental—these gaps are unlikely to close within the standard ALS cycle.

### Learning Environment Conditions in Region X CLCs

A deeper understanding of functional literacy outcomes in ALS must consider the conditions of the learning environments where instruction takes place. Presented in Figure 3, data from the ALS Region X CLC Report (2023) provide insights into CLC ownership, a probable factor influencing learner participation, retention, and achievement.

Figure 3  
CLC Ownership Distribution in Region X



Source: Alternative Learning System Region X (2023).

The ownership distribution reflects the diverse and decentralized nature of governance in ALS delivery across Region X. As illustrated in Figure 3, a little over half of the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are owned and operated by the Department of Education (DepEd), comprising 53% of the total. These DepEd-managed centers often adhere more closely to national curriculum standards, benefiting from standardized oversight, institutional accountability, and alignment with formal quality benchmarks.

In contrast, 26% of CLCs are owned by Local Government Units (LGUs), signaling strong local involvement in education provision. LGU-led centers typically reflect the priorities and capacities of municipal or city governments, and while some are well-resourced, others may operate with limited instructional or physical support. Nonetheless, these centers often serve as important hubs for localized programming and targeted outreach in areas where DepEd's direct presence may be limited.

A further 11% are managed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), indicating the significant role of civil society in reaching marginalized learners, particularly in underserved or geographically isolated communities. These NGO-run centers often bring innovative practices and flexible approaches, though their operations can vary significantly in terms of sustainability, instructional quality, and alignment with national goals.

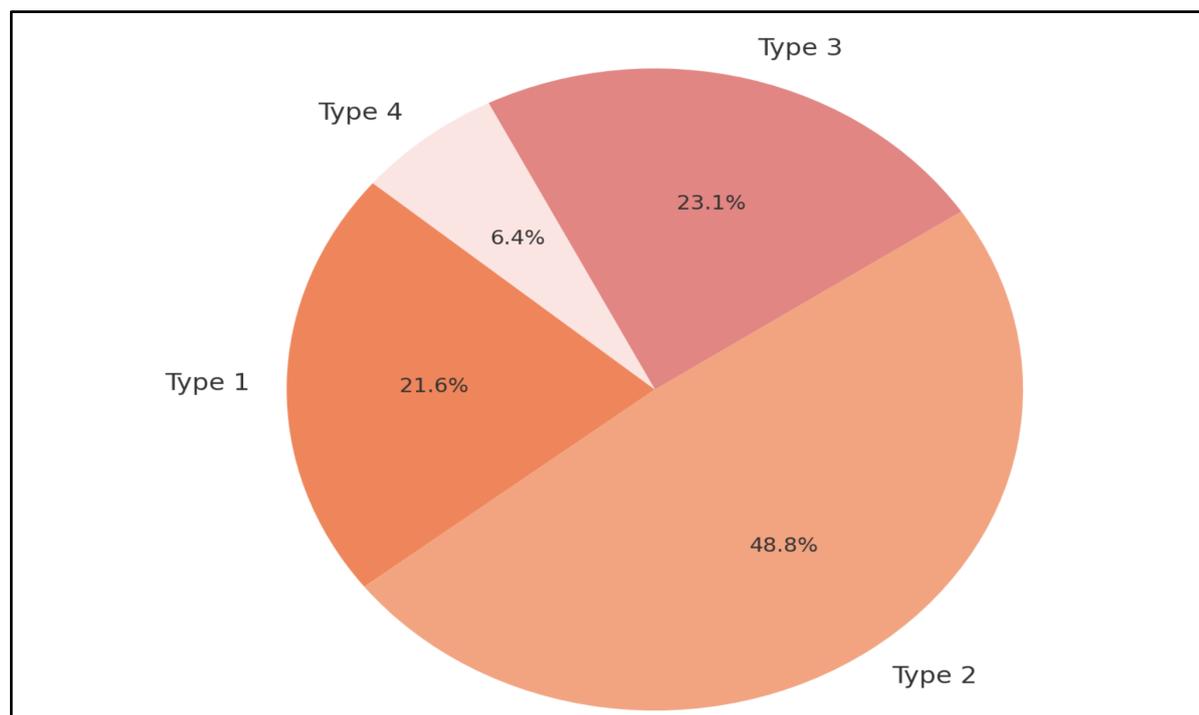
The remaining 10% fall under shared or alternative governance models, including partnerships between private donors, barangay councils, and community-based organizations. While such arrangements expand access, they can also lead to fragmented delivery if roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined.

This diversity of ownership, though a strength in terms of reach and adaptability, presents challenges for coherence, quality assurance, and equitable resource allocation. Strengthening the ALS governance framework must include clearer role delineation, improved inter-agency coordination, and mechanisms for capacity-building across all ownership types to ensure that all CLCs, regardless of managing body, can deliver quality, inclusive, and learner-centered education.

On the other hand, Figure 4 illustrates the typology classification of CLCs in Region X. A significant number are rated as Type 2 (49%), indicating that these centers only partially fulfill the minimum physical and instructional requirements set by DepEd under the ALS framework. While they may offer a dedicated space for learning, many still lack essential facilities such as digital tools, reading corners, or basic utilities.

Alarming, 22% of CLCs remain at Type 1, the lowest classification. These are often temporary or borrowed spaces—such as open chapels, multipurpose barangay halls, or storage areas—characterized by poor lighting, lack of ventilation, and minimal instructional materials. Accordingly, Type 1 CLCs do not meet the prescribed safety, comfort, and functionality standards, making them unsuitable for sustained or structured learning sessions.

Figure 4  
CLC Typology Distribution in Region X



Source: *Alternative Learning System Region X (2023)*.

On the other hand, only 6% of CLCs are classified as Type 4, the highest standard envisioned in RA 11510. Type 4 CLCs are compliant with nearly all criteria of an ideal learning environment: they are purpose-built, adequately resourced, well-ventilated, digitally equipped, and maintained in accordance with accessibility and safety standards. These centers are



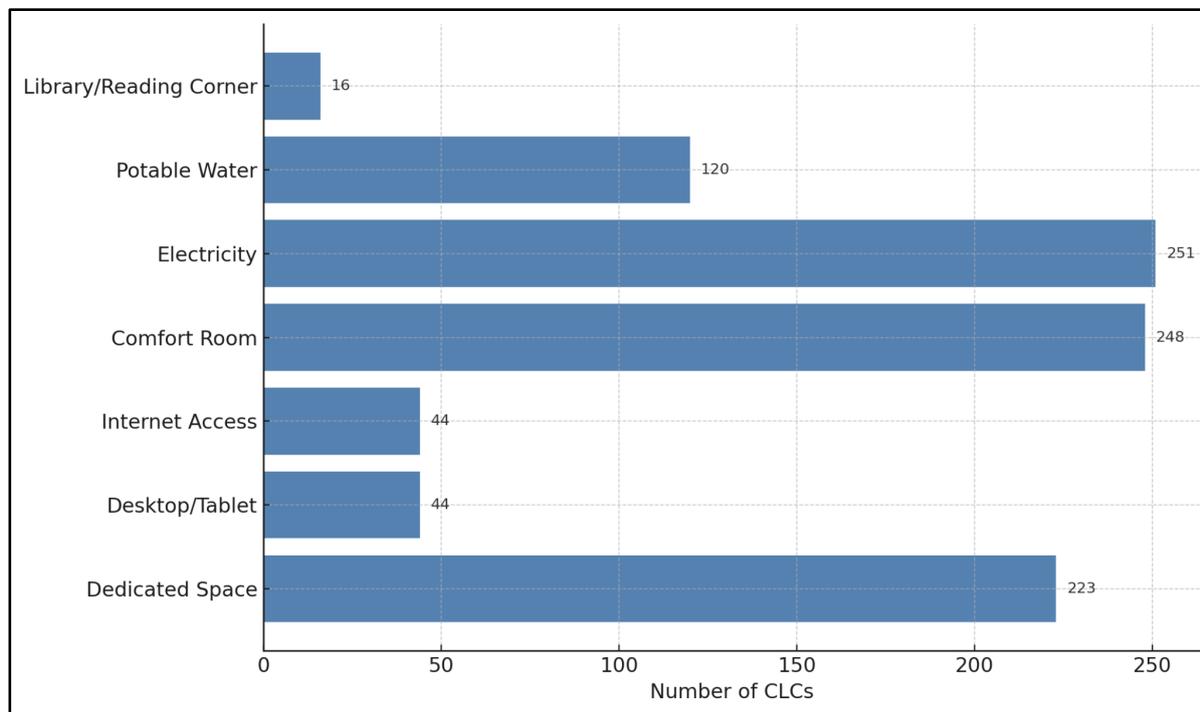
intended to serve as local learning hubs where ALS implementers can facilitate modules, formative assessments, and community-based projects.

The skew toward lower-tier CLC typologies reflects a persistent challenge in implementing RA 11510, namely, the inability of many local governments and partners to invest in infrastructure upgrades. As a result, learners—especially those with no prior schooling—are placed in environments that may hinder rather than support their functional literacy development. This underscores the urgent need for targeted investment and accountability mechanisms to ensure that all CLCs are progressively upgraded to at least Type 3 status, as mandated by the ALS standards and evaluation tools.

### Facility Availability and Literacy Readiness

Facilities available in CLCs were also assessed. As shown in Figure 5, the most commonly available amenities include electricity (251 centers), comfort rooms (248), and dedicated learning spaces (223). However, only 16 centers (4.7%) have a library or reading corner, and fewer than 13% have access to desktop computers or internet connectivity (44 centers each). These findings point to a resource-constrained literacy environment, especially in supporting higher-order reading and digital literacy skills aligned with ALS competencies.

Figure 5  
 Availability of Learning Facilities in Region X CLCs



Source: Alternative Learning System Region X (2023).

The results manifest that the quality of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) has a significant role in literacy outcomes. Most CLCs in Region X fall under Type 1 or Type 2, and only a marginal number meet Type 4 standards. Facilities such as libraries (4.7%) and digital



devices (12.9%) are scarce. These limitations directly affect learners' exposure to rich, diverse text and higher-order thinking tasks—both core components of functional literacy (UNESCO, 2023; Mahinay, Manla, Ramones, & Dinagsao, 2025).

The study supports previous findings that learning spaces shape literacy behaviors. Poorly lit, borrowed, or noisy venues limit time-on-task and reading stamina, especially for older learners with no prior schooling experience. This reinforces the claim that infrastructure is not just a logistical concern, but a pedagogical one, directly impacting literacy learning (Comighud, 2020; SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2020).

The absence of ICT tools in most CLCs contradicts the goals of the ALS K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum, which embeds digital citizenship and information literacy. Learners in rural and underserved areas thus miss out on skills that are now integral to both functional literacy and employability. These findings echo global studies showing that the digital divide is a significant driver of literacy inequality in low-resource settings (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2023).

The few centers that reported access to digital tools typically had stronger LGU or NGO involvement, suggesting that multi-sector partnerships are instrumental in bridging resource gaps. As such, formalizing these partnerships under RA 11510 could create sustainable models for digital inclusion within ALS.

The study also confirms the value of applying an ecological lens in designing ALS interventions. As Bronfenbrenner suggests, effective learning happens when environments are consistent, responsive, and reinforcing across systems. In ALS, this means aligning facilitator training (microsystem) with community involvement (mesosystem), governance structures (exosystem), and policy implementation (macrosystem) to holistically support learners.

### **Implementation Realities and Pedagogical Gaps**

Qualitative insights from Mahinay and Manla (2025) further stress that adult learners benefit from andragogical strategies that are practical, peer-based, and relevant to their everyday experiences. However, such approaches remain underutilized, especially in CLCs constrained by poor facilities and rigid assessment schemes. Reforming the assessment culture, including the high-stakes A&E Test, could encourage more inclusive and formative evaluations of learner progress.

Furthermore, findings echoed and extended the structural issues highlighted in the CLC report. It was emphasized that while the intent behind Republic Act No. 11510 is inclusive, the slow pace of implementation, lack of infrastructure, and insufficient support systems undermine its impact. Their reflections also confirmed the importance of andragogy in ALS, particularly the need for learner-centered, relevant, and life-integrated instruction.

However, participants expressed concern that these principles are not consistently practiced on the ground due to logistical constraints and a lack of teacher training. Furthermore, the high-stakes nature of the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test was seen to cause anxiety among learners, particularly those without foundational schooling experience. Suggestions included incorporating formative, community-based assessment practices and expanding post-program pathways for ALS graduates.



As emphasized earlier, the structural and resource limitations of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are not merely logistical concerns; they directly impact learners’ capacity to achieve functional literacy. With only 4.7% of CLCs equipped with reading corners or mini-libraries, and just 12.9% having access to computers or internet connectivity, most ALS learners—particularly those with no grade completed—are deprived of the basic tools required for sustained engagement with text and technology. These deficits hinder the development of higher-order reading skills, digital navigation, and independent learning, which are essential components of functional literacy in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2023; PSA, 2025). Learners in these environments are forced to rely primarily on printed modules, limiting exposure to diverse texts and interactive learning experiences. Centers with better facilities, often those supported by LGUs or NGOs, show greater learner retention and engagement, underscoring the importance of sustained, multisectoral investment in CLC infrastructure.

Anchored in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, the findings suggest that functional literacy is shaped not only by individual factors but by structural, institutional, and policy contexts as detailed in Table 1. From the microsystem of ALS CLCs to the macrosystem of national policy implementation, gaps in the learning ecosystem cascade into preventable, addressable literacy deficits.

Table 1  
Ecological Systems Analysis of Functional Literacy in the Alternative Learning System

System Layer	Key Influences	Functional Literacy Impacts	Immediacy of Influence
Macrosystem (National Policy)	ALS Policy (RA 11510), Assessment Reform	Policy alignment with foundational literacy needs	Long-term (Policy shifts take time to cascade)
Exosystem (Local Governance)	LGU/NGO Partnerships, Digital Access, Facility Upgrades	Improved infrastructure and digital inclusion	Mid-term (Depends on local adoption and funding cycles)
Mesosystem (Community)	Community Support, Health & Nutrition Programs	Enhanced learner retention and well-being	Mid-term (Programmatic, can shift within a year)
Microsystem (Learning Environment)	CLC Typologies, Instructional Materials, Teacher Practices	Direct engagement with literacy tasks and resources	Short-term (Immediately affects learning sessions)
Individual (Learner Profile)	Non-Enrolled Learners	Initial learning gaps and vulnerability to exclusion	Immediate (Reflects current learner state)



To improve functional literacy rates among the most vulnerable populations, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) must evolve from a model focused solely on access to one that prioritizes quality and equity. One key policy implication is the urgent need to elevate all Community Learning Centers (CLCs) to at least Type 3 standards. This includes institutionalizing book nooks or mini-libraries in every center to ensure consistent exposure to print materials, which are foundational for developing higher-order literacy skills. Additionally, given the widespread lack of connectivity in many rural areas, deploying offline digital hubs, such as e-readers preloaded with open-source modules, literacy applications, and local content, can provide an alternative pathway for delivering 21st-century literacy skills.

The success of such interventions, however, depends heavily on sustained collaboration. Strengthening partnerships among local government units (LGUs), the Department of Education (DepEd), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is essential to institutionalize support mechanisms, whether in the form of infrastructure, transportation subsidies, or supplemental learning resources.

Finally, the current emphasis on high-stakes assessment through the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test should be reconsidered. Embedding more formative, culturally responsive assessment practices that reflect authentic, everyday literacy use can provide a more inclusive and empowering evaluation of learner progress. These strategic shifts, aligned with the mandates of RA 11510 and the vision of SDG 4, can help ensure that ALS truly becomes a transformative pathway for those who have long been left behind.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has shed light on the complex and multi-layered barriers to functional literacy among non-enrolled individuals in Region X. Using data from the 2024 FLEMMS, the ALS Region X CLC Report (2023), and the qualitative insights of Mahinay and Manla (2025), the study uncovered that despite the policy gains of Republic Act No. 11510, the ALS ecosystem continues to struggle in delivering equitable and meaningful learning to those at the furthest margins.

The study affirms that without libraries, digital tools, or inclusive infrastructure, CLCs fall short of delivering transformative literacy. Addressing these foundational gaps through typology upgrades, offline digital hubs, and community-based learning enhancements is critical to moving ALS beyond access and into quality outcomes.

To address these gaps, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Infrastructure Improvement:** Upgrade low-typology CLCs (Type 1 and 2) to meet at least Type 3 standards. Policy should mandate the inclusion of print-rich environments such as reading corners, particularly in centers serving populations with no prior formal education.
2. **Digital Inclusion via Offline Solutions:** ALS implementers and LGUs should pilot and scale offline digital hubs—using e-readers or tablets preloaded with culturally relevant modules and apps—to bridge the digital divide where internet access is still unavailable.
3. **Localized Support and Governance:** Strengthen governance arrangements through formalized partnerships among DepEd, LGUs, and NGOs. These can be leveraged to fund transport, nutrition, and facility upgrades—components critical to learner retention and program completion.



4. Assessment Reform: Complement the Accreditation and Equivalency Test with community-based and formative assessments that reflect actual literacy practices in daily life. This shift will enable more inclusive measurement and support differentiated instruction.
5. Andragogical Training and CPD: Ensure continuous professional development for ALS implementers, particularly on andragogy and functional literacy strategies. Training should emphasize flexibility, practical relevance, and learner empowerment, especially for adult learners entering ALS from zero schooling backgrounds.

Improving functional literacy among the non-enrolled is not merely an education issue; it is a matter of equity and social justice. A reimagined ALS, grounded in quality, contextual responsiveness, and inclusive learning environments, can serve as a vital platform for realizing the promise of lifelong learning for all.

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