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ALS Research Agenda: **Impact of Innovations from the Field**

Lived Experiences of Students and Implementers in the Pilot Implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program

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Abstract

The Academic-Focused Bridging Program (AFBP) is a strategic intervention under the Philippine Alternative Learning System (ALS) designed to address foundational learning gaps among Junior High School completers and support their transition to Senior High School or technical-vocational pathways. This study explored the lived experiences of learners and implementers during the pilot implementation of AFBP in Northern Mindanao, with the aim of generating evidence-based insights for program refinement and scaling. Guided by a phenomenological research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations involving both student participants and program implementers. Thematic analysis revealed that learners experienced increased academic confidence, renewed mastery of foundational competencies, and improved readiness for post-basic education pathways. However, they also encountered persistent challenges, including financial constraints, competing work responsibilities, and limited access to learning resources, which affected attendance and continuity. Implementers highlighted the program's relevance and transformative potential but reported operational difficulties related to logistics, resource adequacy, time constraints, and the need for targeted professional development in bridging pedagogy and adult learning approaches. The study concludes that while AFBP demonstrates strong promise as a transition support mechanism within ALS, its effectiveness depends on addressing structural and capacity-related constraints. It recommends extending program duration, strengthening resource allocation, and institutionalizing adult learning principles in teacher training to enhance instructional responsiveness. These findings contribute to the growing evidence base on transition-focused interventions in alternative education and provide actionable inputs for strengthening the scalability and sustainability of bridging programs.

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I. Introduction

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) serves as one of the Philippine government's primary mechanisms for providing flexible, non-formal education to out-of-school youths and adults who have missed formal schooling. Republic Act No. 11510, known as the ALS Act of 2020, institutionalized and strengthened ALS to ensure that learners who complete the Junior High School Accreditation and Equivalency Test (A&E) may transition into Senior High School (SHS) or enter selected Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET) opportunities. However, despite meeting credential requirements, many ALS completers demonstrate academic skill gaps that impede successful transition, retention, and performance in advanced levels of education (Delos Santos & Balanon, 2019; Rahmani et al., 2024).

The Academic-Focused Bridging Program (AFBP) is a recent response to this concern. Developed under the Bureau of Alternative Education (BAE) and implemented through DepEd Memorandum DM-CT-2024-225, the AFBP aims to provide supplemental instruction to reinforce foundational academic competencies aligned with SHS expectations. The program scaffolds learning progression and offers transition support to minimize attrition among ALS learners who pursue further education.

The significance of the AFBP is situated within a broader national commitment to educational equity and social inclusion, supported by Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013) and DepEd Order No. 13, s. 2019. These documents emphasize differentiated pathways and learner-centered curriculum design to accommodate diverse educational backgrounds. Yet, as a newly piloted program, the implementation processes, instructional dynamics, and learner outcomes of the AFBP remain under-documented. Understanding the lived experiences of students and implementers is therefore critical for improving program design and ensuring equitable transition support systems for ALS learners.

Mezirow's (1996) Transformative Learning Theory posits that adults learn through reflective engagement with experiences that challenge their assumptions. In the context of ALS learners—many of whom come from socioeconomically constrained and educationally disrupted backgrounds—structured bridging programs can provide transformative conditions for re-engagement with academic identity and self-efficacy (Barth et al., 2021; Hoggan, 2016). Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD framework informs the instructional design of bridging programs. Scaffolding, gradually withdrawn as competency develops, supports learners in progressing toward independent mastery (Richardson et al., 2022; Van de Pol et al., 2015). However, insufficient teacher preparedness in scaffolding adult learners may undermine program impact (McKay & Devlin, 2016; Özkan, 2022).

Academic bridging programs have historically been designed to support learners who transition into more advanced educational pathways by addressing academic gaps, increasing learner confidence, and facilitating adjustment to new learning environments (Gore et al., 2017; Zuckerman et al., 2022). These programs often emphasize skill reinforcement, critical thinking, communication, and self-directed learning (Baik et al., 2015; Bradford et al., 2021).

This study intends to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of students who participated in the Pilot Implementation of Academic-Focused Bridging Program?
2. What challenges do students face during their participation in the Pilot Implementation of Academic-Focused Bridging Program?

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3. What are the perspectives of implementers on the design, delivery, and impact of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program?
4. What challenges do implementers encounter in the pilot implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program?

II. Methodology
Research Design
This study utilized phenomenological research design. A phenomenological approach is important for understanding the lived experiences of both learners and educators in academic-focused bridging programs. Phenomenology focuses on capturing the essence of participants' experiences, offering deep insights into how they perceive and interpret their educational journeys (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016).

Sampling
This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who are directly involved in the pilot implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program (AFBP) in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Two groups were targeted: 15 students currently enrolled in the AFBP and 10 implementers (including teachers, program coordinators, and administrators). Students were chosen based on their active participation in the program, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of demographics. Implementers were selected based on their roles in the program's delivery and management. The sample size was determined through the principle of data saturation, where data collection continues until no new themes or insights emerge (Flick, 2018; Guest et al., 2020).

Data Collection
Data collection was conducted using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations. In-depth interviews were held with both students and implementers to capture detailed insights into their personal experiences and perceptions of the AFBP. FGDs were organized separately for students and implementers to facilitate discussion and identify common themes. Participant observations were used to observe the dynamics of program implementation in real-time. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality (Bernard, 2017; Saldaña, 2016).

Ethical Issues
Ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they understand the study's purpose, their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants and securely storing data. The study complied with ethical guidelines set forth by the relevant institutional review board or ethics committee. Additionally, participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any penalty (American Psychological Association, 2017; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; Klykken, 2022).

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Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The analysis process involved several stages: familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, and synthesis. The thematic analysis focused on uncovering key themes related to the lived experiences of students and implementers, as well as the challenges they face and the strategies they employ. The findings presented with the responses from participants support the identified themes and provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Ong, 2022).

III. Results and Discussions

Lived Experiences of Students Participating in the Pilot Implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program (AFBP)

Theme 1: Positive Learning Experience

Positive learning experience implies the participants' acquisition and refreshment of both skill and knowledge, helping them boost their confidence.

Sub-theme 1.1: Skill Acquisition and Knowledge Refreshment

Participants in the pilot Alternative Learning System Bridging Program (AFBP) reported notable improvements in their skill sets and knowledge base. Specifically, learners expressed how the program supported their transition to Senior High School (SHS) by reinforcing previously learned concepts while introducing new content. This dual approach helped them build confidence and readiness for SHS. Learners provided feedback such as, "I learned new skills and knowledge" (learner 29) and "This program helps me fresh the past lessons" (learner 3).

The program focused on revisiting foundational subjects like mathematics and science, which had posed challenges for many students during their Junior High School (JHS) ALS journey. Revisiting these subjects allowed learners to bridge gaps in understanding and enhance their preparedness for more advanced academic content.

This finding aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) and Davis (2025) assertion that academic transition programs play a critical role in reinforcing foundational skills, which are essential for student success in higher education settings. The ability to revisit and strengthen previously acquired knowledge enables learners to approach new concepts with a firmer grounding, reducing the cognitive load during transitions. Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2021) emphasize that structured programs focusing on both skill acquisition and knowledge refreshment contribute to sustained academic engagement and performance improvements. This study's results reaffirm the importance of such initiatives in addressing the needs of transitioning learners, particularly those from non-traditional educational backgrounds.

Sub-theme 1.2: Boost in Confidence

The Alternative Learning System Bridging Program (AFBP) demonstrated a positive influence on students' confidence levels. Participants reported a significant boost in self-assurance as they progressed through the program, particularly in relation to their

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preparedness for Senior High School (SHS). Statements such as "The AFBP boosts my confidence" (learners 1, 2 & 8) and "The program helps us to be prepared for SHS" (learners 16, 17 & 22) reflect this sentiment.

This aligns with Black (2024) and Creswell and Poth's (2018) findings that bridging programs focusing on academic skill development foster greater self-confidence and academic resilience in learners. These programs help students regain trust in their abilities and encourage them to approach future educational challenges with a positive outlook. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2020) highlighted the critical role of bridging programs in enhancing learners' psychological readiness and motivation, thus improving academic outcomes and retention.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Impact

This theme highlights how being part of the program affects learners not just intellectually, but also emotionally and psychologically. Their feelings, sense of confidence, and overall well-being play a big role in how engaged they are and how well they perform academically. Learning is not just about acquiring skills or knowledge, how learners feel about themselves, their peers, and the learning environment can shape the way they tackle challenges, participate in discussions, and stay committed to reaching their educational goals.

Sub-theme 2.1: Sense of Belonging and Motivation

The program fostered a sense of belonging and emotional well-being among participants. Many students expressed feelings welcomed and valued by their teachers and peers, with learners sharing, "I felt welcomed and accepted by the teachers and classmates" (learners 1, 7 & 11). This sense of inclusion appears to have significantly contributed to their motivation to continue their education.

According to Braun and Clarke (2019) and Puranitee (2022), a sense of belonging is a key factor in adult learning settings, particularly within non-traditional education systems. Creating an inclusive environment where learners feel supported and valued has a direct impact on their psychological engagement and commitment to learning. Moreover, Wong et al. (2021) demonstrated that fostering emotional connections in learning environments enhances student persistence and intrinsic motivation, which is essential for academic success in transitional programs.

Challenges Faced by Students During Their Participation in the Pilot Implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program

Theme 1: External Barriers to Attendance
This theme focuses on the external factors that make it difficult for learners to attend the program consistently. These barriers are often beyond the learners' control but have a significant impact on their participation, engagement, and overall learning experience. Recognizing these challenges is important for developing strategies that help learners stay connected and supported throughout the program.

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Sub-theme 1.1: Work and Family Responsibilities

Students in the program often struggled to balance their academic commitments with work and family responsibilities. Many reported that their work schedules and caregiving roles significantly interfered with their ability to attend classes. For instance, one learner noted, "I am working 8-10 hours daily therefore there are times that I can't study and attend classes" (learner 9), while another shared, "I am taking care of younger siblings, therefore sometimes I can't attend classes" (learner 10).

These challenges align with findings in adult education research, where work and family obligations are recognized as significant barriers to regular attendance and academic engagement. According to Houle (2019) and Xavier and Meneses (2022), flexible scheduling and tailored support mechanisms are essential for adult learners to balance competing responsibilities, which directly impacts their academic persistence.

Sub-theme 1.2: Financial Barriers

Financial challenges were another significant barrier for many students. Learners highlighted issues such as the inability to afford transportation and other school-related expenses. For instance, one student stated, "Financial problems hamper me to attend classes" (learner 10), while another said, "The fare is the most factor that I can't attend classes" (learner 9). These barriers reflect broader socio-economic issues that impact educational access, particularly for marginalized groups. As noted by Schwartz et al. (2020), addressing financial challenges through targeted interventions, such as transportation allowances and scholarships, can significantly improve attendance and reduce dropout rates.

Theme 2: Academic Barriers

This theme highlights the challenges learners face related to the academic demands of the program. Beyond external circumstances, learners often encounter difficulties stemming from the design, pace, and complexity of the curriculum. Understanding these academic barriers is essential for improving program delivery, ensuring learners can grasp content effectively, and supporting their overall success.

Sub-theme 2.1: Difficult Content and Fast-Paced Curriculum

Students also reported struggles with the complexity of subjects, particularly math and science, as well as the fast-paced nature of the curriculum. One learner remarked, "The subject or lesson is in fast pacing that we can't catch up with" (learner 12). These issues are consistent with challenges identified in transitional education programs, where curricula often aim to cover a broad range of topics in a short time frame, leaving learners feeling overwhelmed.

According to Clarke and Visser (2019) and van Nooijen (2024), tailoring curriculum pacing and incorporating scaffolding techniques can enhance learner comprehension and retention, reducing academic stress. Additionally, Nguyen et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of aligning content delivery with learners' abilities to create a more supportive educational environment.

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Perspectives of Implementers on the Design, Delivery, and Impact of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program

Theme 1: Program Design and Delivery

This theme explores how the design and delivery of the program influence learner experiences and outcomes. The way a program is structured, the support provided, and the availability of resources play a critical role in determining its effectiveness. Effective program design can empower learners and facilitate engagement, while shortcomings in planning or resources can hinder learning and participation.

Sub-theme 1.1: Positive Support and Advocacy

The Alternative Learning System Bridging Program (AFBP) garnered strong support from its implementers, who recognized its value for Junior High School (JHS) ALS completers. Implementers highlighted the program's significance in reinforcing foundational skills and preparing learners for Senior High School (SHS). The implementers stated, "This program is significant to our JHS ALS completers" (implementers 4, 6, 10 & 20), while an implementer shared, "I appreciate this program because it really helps our ALS JHS to refresh their learnings" (implementer 5).

The consensus among implementers underscores the critical role of advocacy and support in ensuring the program's success, as noted by Fullan (2020), who emphasizes that positive attitudes among stakeholders contribute significantly to the implementation and sustainability of educational reforms.

Sub-theme 1.2: Inadequate Resources and Planning

Despite strong advocacy, significant limitations in planning and resource allocation hindered the program's full potential. Teachers faced challenges in accessing teaching materials and assessments, which impacted the program's delivery. As one implementer explained, "I was not given materials to teach or any ready-made materials to use" (implementer 14).

These findings align with Chuene (2024) and Schleicher's (2019) assertion that resource inadequacies are a common barrier to the successful implementation of educational programs. Addressing these challenges through better planning and resource support is essential to maximize the program's effectiveness and sustainability.

Theme 2: Impact of the Bridging Program

This theme captures how participation in the bridging program influences learners' readiness for further education. It highlights the tangible benefits of the program in enhancing learners' skills, knowledge, and confidence, which are essential for their success in advanced educational pathways.

Sub-theme 2.1: Positive Impact on Learners' Academic Preparedness

The bridging program had a positive impact on learners, particularly in improving their academic readiness for SHS. Implementers consistently highlighted the program's role in addressing learning gaps and equipping students with foundational skills. As implementers

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observed, "This academic-focused bridging program is significant to our ALS JHS completers to bridge their learning gap" (implementers 2, 3 8 & 19).

However, concerns were raised about the program's duration, with another implementer stating, "I don't believe that 2 weeks is enough to really bridge the learning gap" (implementer 5). This is consistent with research by Nguyen et al. (2020), which emphasizes that adequate time and resources are critical for bridging programs to achieve their intended outcomes. Extending the program's duration could enhance its ability to address learners' academic needs comprehensively.

Challenges Encountered by Implementers in the Pilot Implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program

Theme 1: Logistical and Organizational Challenges

This theme highlights the practical challenges in the implementation of the program that affect its overall effectiveness. Organizational and logistical issues, such as scheduling, planning, and resource availability, play a significant role in how smoothly the program operates and how well learners can engage with it. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure that learners receive consistent support and meaningful learning experiences.

Sub-theme 1.1: Time Constraints and Limited Preparation

The implementation of the Alternative Learning System Bridging Program (AFBP) was significantly hindered by time constraints and insufficient preparation. Implementers reported that the short notice given for the program's launch made it difficult to effectively plan and prepare. Implementers shared, "We lacked preparation for the implementation since the notice given to us to implement the program is so short" (implementers 1 & 6). Teachers also highlighted challenges with time management, as the program's compressed schedule left little room for detailed lesson planning or adjustments.

According to Harris and Jones (2019) and McLure and Aldridge (2023), rushed implementation processes often result in suboptimal outcomes due to inadequate preparation and planning time. For programs like AFBP, ensuring ample lead time for preparation is essential to enhance program delivery and effectiveness.

Sub-theme 1.2: Resource Limitations

Resource limitations were another critical challenge identified by implementers. The absence of standardized learning modules and other necessary teaching materials created significant barriers to program implementation. One administrator noted, "Lack of resources is one of the challenges that hampers the implementation particularly in what learning resource should we use for this program" (Implementer 20). Teachers were often forced to create their own materials, adding to their workload.

Chuene and Teane (2024) and Schleicher (2019) underscores that inadequate access to teaching resources is a common issue in educational programs, particularly in transitional systems. Addressing this challenge by providing sufficient teaching and assessment materials is critical to ensuring program success.

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Theme 2: Teacher Preparedness and Support

This theme examines how the readiness and support of teachers influence the effectiveness of the program. Teacher capacity, including training, knowledge, and instructional skills, is critical in ensuring that learners receive quality education. Insufficient teacher preparedness can impact both learner engagement and learning outcomes, highlighting the need for professional development and structured support systems.

Sub-theme 2.1: Lack of Teacher Training and Capacity

The lack of teacher training, particularly in andragogy (adult learning), was a significant challenge for program implementers. Teachers expressed difficulty in aligning their strategies to the unique needs of ALS learners, with one teacher stating, "I need to align my strategy to these kinds of learners" (implementer 2). Administrators also acknowledged the difficulty in finding qualified facilitators and the inefficacy of a one-size-fits-all approach for such a diverse group of learners.

Nguyen et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of specialized teacher training in adult education, as it equips educators with the tools and strategies needed to address the specific needs of non-traditional learners. Moreover, providing continuous professional development opportunities can enhance teacher capacity and confidence, ultimately improving program outcomes.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The pilot implementation of the Academic-Focused Bridging Program (AFBP) has significantly impacted both students and implementers. For students, the program has proven effective in enhancing their academic skills, boosting their confidence, and preparing them for the transition to Senior High School (SHS). While they expressed satisfaction with the knowledge refreshment and skill-building aspects, external barriers, such as work commitments and financial constraints, were common challenges that hindered their full participation. Emotional support and a sense of belonging were also vital components, contributing to increased motivation among students to continue their academic journey.

Implementers, including teachers and administrators, generally supported the program, recognizing its importance in bridging the educational gap for Adult Learners' (ALS) Junior High School (JHS) completers. However, they faced significant challenges, particularly related to resource limitations, time constraints, and a lack of preparation for the program's rapid deployment. Despite these hurdles, the program's positive impact on student preparedness for SHS was widely acknowledged. However, the brief duration of the pilot program and the lack of proper teacher training in adult learning theory hindered its full potential.

Given the findings, the following are recommended:
1. Extend the AFBP duration to support skill mastery and reduce the instructional burdens.
2. Provide teacher training in andragogy, scaffolding, and differentiated instruction.
3. Develop standardized learning resources while allowing contextual flexibility.
4. Implement flexible and blended delivery modes to better accommodate working learners.

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5. Strengthen financial assistance programs by improving access to transportation and meal subsidies.
6. Establish structured psychosocial support and mentoring systems.
7. Develop institutionalized mechanisms to ensure continuous monitoring and thorough impact evaluation.

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