

EDUCATION BEHIND BARS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative-phenomenological study was to explore the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms and suggestions of the ALS Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDL) learners of Maximum-Security Compound, Davao Prison and Penal Farm, B.E Dujali, Davao Del Norte for school year 2022-2023. There were ten purposively selected PDL learners who participated in the conduct of the study. With the used of In-depth Interview, findings revealed that ALS is essential in the transformation of the PDL learners but they have experienced many challenges in attending the ALS classes. However, there are several advantages that PDL learners gained some remarkable changes not only learning reading and writing but for the transformation of the self. The results implied that PDL learners have difficulty in understanding the lesson for reason of old age, lack of comprehension, and not serious with the program. The implication of this could be that Instructional Managers, Education and Training personnel, and DepEd personnel need additional skill which is suited to the PDL learners. Furthermore, the findings showed that ALS classes are quite challenging, provided the much-needed help to the PDL. ALS classes should be sustained in prison camp to ensure the learning and for the transformation of the PDLs. However, PDL learners faced many challenges: lack of motivation, ailments, and family problem. It is advised that they would have to manage their time.

Keywords: - *Qualitative-Phenomenological, Alternative Learning System, ALS classes, Persons deprived of Liberty, PDL learners, IDI*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education program like the Alternative Learning System (ALS) helps promote the welfare of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) and this extends to the society as well. Adhering to the philosophy that a well-rounded individual through proper education guidance ensures a productive and responsible citizenry, the Davao Prison Penal Farm offers ALS to PDLs to attain education. In the Philippines, it is a ladder modular non-formal education program for elementary and secondary school dropouts, out-of-school youth, non-readers, working adults, and even seniors. Basic literacy programs, secondary school equivalency programs, and vocational education are examples of educational activities that take place inside of prison (Azarcon, 2014). Rehabilitation programs, physical education classes, and arts and crafts classes are all examples of reformation prison education. This education and training programs are typically funded by the Bureau of Corrections under the Department of Justice.

On the one hand, a study that was carried out by the correctional Education Association and the US Department of Education found that PDLs who took classes while they were in prison, whether they were vocational training classes or classes at the high school or college level, had a lower chance of returning to prison within the first three years of their release. More than 3,000 PDLs in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio were followed by the study. Only 22% of PDLs who participated in education returned to prison three years later, compared to 31% of those who did not. Therefore, education for PDLs will benefit not only the prisoner but also the public's safety. According to the findings (Steurer, 2008), prison education contributes to crime reduction.

Azarcon (2014), on the other hand, conducted a study to assess the extent and efficacy of the ALS program services provided to Bulacan Provincial Jail PDLs by the Bulacan State University Extension office. Despite the lower percentage of graduates, it has been deemed sufficient and effective enough despite the significant correlation between the rating of PDLs and the perceived extent of services provided to them. Last but not least, the findings provided the foundation for the necessary actions to be taken regarding the extension office's services, particularly its literacy program.

One of the seven penal institutions in the Philippines that adopts ALS for the PDLs is Davao Prison and Penal Farm located at B.E. Dujali, Davao del Norte with the objective to educate PDLs who are not able to finish elementary and who are drop outs. It is an alternative to the regular classroom where PDLs are required to attend daily. ALS requires the students to choose schedules according to their choice and availability. However, in the case of prison education, sessions are based on the schedule of activities facilitated by the Bureau of Corrections which are handled by licensed professional teachers. In the implementation of ALS to the PDLs, there are lots of challenges encountered by authorities such as lack of education and training of the staff, budget shortages, lack of educational resources, prohibition of technology, lack of motivation, and strict security requirements for the transfer of PDLs among security compounds. These cause some PDLs not to participate. As observed by the researcher, some PDLs failed due to lack of motivation, depression, and health reasons. Many of these PDLs lack the enthusiasm to attend classes. In all of these, the researcher desires to conduct a phenomenological study to explore the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and realizations of the PDLs who are enrolled in ALS in Davao Prison and Penal Farm.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of PDL learners in ALS classes?
2. What are the challenges of the participants in ALS classes?
3. What coping mechanism do the participants have as learners in ALS classes?
4. What are the suggestions of the participants to improve the education in the penal institution?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The design used in the study was qualitative-phenomenological. It was phenomenological because it sought to explore the experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and suggestions of PDLs learners. A qualitative research method known as phenomenology (Giorgi, 2012) was used to describe how people respond to a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological research sought to dispel preconceptions and prejudices regarding human perceptions, feelings, and responses to a situation. It gave the researcher access to the perspectives, understandings, and feelings of other people who had witnessed or experienced the phenomenon or circumstance of interest. The in-depth interview (IDI) would be used by the researcher to collect information from the ten participants who would be chosen intentionally. According to Creswell (2007), the requirement for a qualitative study employing phenomenology was met by the participant sample size.

2.2 Research Participants

The participants of this research were selected purposively. The sample preference of this study was based on the inclusion criteria set by the researcher. Such criteria included those who were enrolled in ALS; had the communication skill to share their experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms and suggestions; and had the critical mind to see the positive aspect of prison education and the problems they encountered. The research participants were 10 PDLs at the Maximum-Security Compound. The participants were requested to sign a consent form and agreed to the condition stipulated that they were voluntarily participating and were willing to impart their knowledge as needed in the study. The participants also were given an orientation about the study and were asked to participate through an In-Depth Interview (IDI) as means of data collection. It is important to emphasize that the discussion was about personal views and experiences and therefore there are no right or wrong answers (Dornyei, 2007). Data from the participants were generated through a semi-structured interview using validated interview questions as an instrument. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. The use of pseudonyms was employed to protect the identity of the participants in the data analysis and reporting.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

A set of steps were followed in conducting the study. The data were collected through in-depth interview. First, I asked permission through a letter addressed to the Acting Regional Superintendent in Davao Prison and Penal Farm. After obtaining permission, research participants were asked to sign a consent form and be informed of the study's intent. I identified some issues for collecting data. I used the face-face IDI. The said interview was utilized the interview guide. A free-flowing discussion with the participants as well as non-threatening environment assured during the interview. These PDL learners were informed personally ahead of time about the discussion so they were not be taken by surprise.

2.4 Data Analysis

After collecting data, the researcher used transcription to make sense of the details. The first step in data analysis was to transcribe everything. Transcription was the method of converting all data into text. Following data transcription, I referred to the research questions and arranged the collected data. For a more effective data processing method, coding was the best way to compress the data into easily understandable concepts. Coding was the process of categorizing data into principles, properties, trends, or emerging themes in qualitative research. One of the foundations of good research was data validation. Since data were at the core of this research, it was critical to ensure that all data were free of errors.

3. RESULT, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 On the Experiences of PDL Learners

Delighted being educated through ALS. The findings revealed that ALS classes was most commonly used that delighted the PDL learners. For the participants, being educated through ALS, give them thrill in such a way that they are not only serving sentence but also learning new concepts. The effectiveness of correctional education primarily shows recidivism, in terms of reoffending, re-arrest, or reincarceration, and employment-related measures such as labor market participation and wages (Gaes, 2008). According to the findings (Steurer, 2008), prison education contributes to crime reduction.

Not getting used to it. Even incarcerated, ALS classes help the PDL learners from elementary or secondary, dropouts, non-readers, working adults, and seniors through basic literacy programs, secondary school equivalency programs, and vocational education taken inside of prison (Azarcon, 2014).

Able to learn new lesson. ALS classes help the PDLs acquire new concepts. Azarcon (2014), ALS class has been deemed sufficient and effective enough despite the significant correlation between the rating of PDLs and the perceived extent of services provided to them. The findings provided the foundation for the necessary actions to be taken particularly the literacy program.

3.2 On the advantages or observed in ALS classes

Learn about reading and writing. ALS classes help the PDLs read and write through the Instructional Managers or PDL teacher who help the Education and Training Teachers and the DEPED personnel. The Education and Training would be monitoring the ALS classes from the Lower Elementary to the Senior High School learners. According to Colley et al. (2003), the presence of an instructor who directs the learning and provides pedagogical support is a critical process element that distinguishes between types of learning. According to him, the most formal learning includes an instructor, while alternative learning includes a trained mentor or counselor, and even alternative learning may involve a friend or a coworker sharing knowledge.

Experience some remarkable changes. PDL learners gain some remarkable experiences because they have changed from being violent to an educated individual. Giles (2016) discovered that the more classes PDLs completed in a study of prisoners participating in education in prison in Western Australia, the lower the rate of re-incarceration.

Provide much to finish studies. ALS classes give the PDLs an opportunity to finish college because the penal farm is now offering college courses like Agriculture. This is plus for them in such a way that their tuition fee, food, clothes, dormitory, and even the security has been a priority of the Bureau of Corrections although limited but it is fairly distributed. Bozick et al (2018) concluded that providing PDLs with educational opportunities while they serve their sentences is beneficial if the program's goal is to reduce recidivism. Skills-based, vocational approaches to education in prison although criticized but it provides as job training ground.

An opportunity for PDLs gains some skills. ALS classes give them an opportunity to gain some skills since aside from academic activities, they are exposed to extra-curricular activities like sports and literary during the monthly activities. High-pressure environments, such as congestion can motivate PDLs to learn more because the value of achieving a goal is significant (O'Neill & Thomson, 2013).

3.3 Disadvantages of ALS classes for the PDL learners

Improper giving of procedure. The Bureau of Corrections is actually appropriating a budget for the skills training of the PDL teachers for them to be able to facilitate effectively their learners. If this is carried out by the Education and Training, the difficulty of PDL learners in understanding the lesson as well as the problem in reading comprehension would eventually minimize. According to H. Rangel Terrijo (2019), that cuts to prison budgets usually have a negative impact on program delivery, particularly education (Smith, 2013; Warner, 2007; Warr 2016). Its goal was to provide material that encourages positive practices while avoiding uncomfortable questions about education in prison. Advancing Corrections published *Innovation in Education: Voices from the Front Line*, and Review of Communications (2019) published a special issue on the same topic.

PDLs not serious with the program. Academic failure and lack of motivation are two factors contributing to PDLs' unwillingness to participate in programs (Hawley et al., 2013). This is due to not conducive learning environment in prison.

Difficulty in reading comprehension. Like the education outside the prison, difficulty in reading comprehension is a challenge of the teachers for their learners be able to cope with the lesson. Some learners may be able to read but have no idea on the message of what they are reading. That is why training programs for the Instructional Managers and the personnel in education need additional trainings that are suited to the needs of the PDL learners. There are variety obstacles to running educational programs and participating in prisons. When teaching a class with a large age, educational level, or employment history disparity, teachers may face a variety of challenges (Tam et al., 2007).

Feeling awkward due to age. Some of the PDL learners are aged from 40-60 years old. They are shy to continue study because they have been bullied and had been discouraged. Prisons face difficulties as a result of the diverse academic and emotional requirements of the PDLs (Gorgol et al., 2011).

Limited implementation inside the facility. Some PDL learners are not interested to report in class for reason of limited facility, lack of a secure classroom for classes, a lack of audio-visual equipment and computers (or simply access to them), a suitable place to study, and a suitable location for group work activities after class hours are additional obstacles to prison education (Garner, 2017). Due to unavailability of classrooms, they conduct their classes in the Catholic Chapel, Seventh Day Adventist Church, and Visiting Hall.

But if we are going to analyze the impact of ALS on the lives of the PDL learners especially after the interviews that were done, the researcher would proudly say that the ALS program is a success. Just like in Thailand, they are not only organizing professional training courses for accreditation purposes but also to make PDLs aware of the fact that they belong to a community of values. Moreover, just like the findings of Steurer (2008), the ALS program is promoting PDLs' welfare and may this extend to the society as well that those who have undergone classes while in prison may also be less likely to go back to prison when they were freed.

3.4 Description of ALS Classes

Classes quite challenging. For the PDL learners, ALS classes is quite challenging since the lessons are new to them. In fact, some of them are old who have forgotten the lesson a long time ago. They were in prison for many years from jail to the Bureau of Corrections.

The ALS is the flagship education program of the Education and Training. It enables the PDL learners to develop basic functional literacy skills and provide opportunities complete basic education levels without going through regular classes. ALS learners also have the option to take an accreditation and equivalency certification that will allow them to continue their education in the formal system. The Education and Training pushed for a stronger implementation of the ALS program, stressing the need to reach hundreds of those left behind.

However, earlier this year, the DEPED started implementing an enhanced ALS curriculum in line with the K-12 program. According to DepEd, the new ALS curriculum, while not a mirror image of the formal school curriculum, is substantially aligned with the competencies of the K-12 system. It covers information and communications technology and life and career skills, as well as competencies not included in formal curricula that aim to provide support to the specific needs of the learners such as applications of competencies in everyday life. While it has five key stages, only four are currently being implemented – basic literacy, lower elementary, advanced elementary and junior high school. The ALS senior high school curriculum is now implemented by Education and Training in all camps of

Davao Prison and Penal Farm with the proper coordination of the DEPED personnel. This aims to administer a program known as the Alternative Learning System (ALS) that seeks to help out-of-school youth, industry-based workers, people with disabilities, PDLs, rebels, members of cultural minorities, children in conflict with the law, and those that are in conflict-stricken areas, and other people who, for one reason or another, cannot afford to go through formal schooling. Both, aimed at making available and accessible more options for strengthening the literacy program and development of knowledge and skills of the Persons Deprived of Liberty Learners.

Provided the much-needed help to the PDL. Aside from acquiring knowledge and skills, ALS helps to minimize lonesomeness. It promotes the welfare of the PDLs and this extends to the society as well. Rehabilitation programs, physical education classes, and arts and crafts classes are all examples of reformation prison education that help the PDLs fight against their loneliness. Basic education, secondary education, and vocational education are educational activities that take place inside of prison (Azarcon, 2014).

Mentor's effort worth appreciating. The ALS learners who have attended the class would really appreciate the effort of the teachers or the instructional manager because they have undergone trainings provided by the ALS education division that is funded by the Bureau of Corrections. Education and Training personnel have conducted teachers' summit every year in order to meet the needs of the PDL learners.

3.5 Challenges encountered in ALS classes

Sluggish in going to ALS classes. Although being sluggish is very common to the learners outside the penal institution but for the PDLs it is the major problem. Some of them have lost their interest for reason of hopelessness. Kjelsberg, et al. (2007), the prison environment itself can foster or impinge upon the effective implementation of correctional education programs and hence affect patronage levels by PDLs.

Being hampered by ailment. Sleeping on the floor the whole night results to ailments. This is caused by the high congested prison rooms. A lack of a secure classroom for classes, a lack of audio-visual equipment and computers, a suitable place to study, and a suitable location for group work activities after class hours are obstacles to prison education (Garner, 2017).

Distracted with family problems. For the PDL learners, attendance in class is mostly affected by family problems specially those who are married whose wife is having new family. They are hopeless and think what is the purpose of schooling if I have nothing. I have no more family to attend to. Farley et al. (2017) contend that lack of learning support and cultural capital exacerbate poor enrolment and retention rates in education. Incarcerated students are very often first-in-family to participate in post-secondary education. They are frequently participating without any support from their families or communities, lacking the cultural capital that would normalize their participation.

3.6 Ways used in handling challenges in ALS classes

Through self-discipline. For the PDL learners, ALS classes help to control themselves from doing illegal acts like using illegal drugs. It helps to manage themselves than complaining that they have no hope for education. Key and May (2019) believe that education in prison is more than just a tool for crime reduction, and that it can be a liberating process that goes far beyond the original goal of state-sponsored rehabilitation.

The Education and Training program is based on the DEPED curriculum relative to the premise that managing PDL behavior is the core of prison operations. One of the elements of PDL behavior management is the assessment of the risk and needs of each PDL upon his endorsement at the prison through Basic Orientation, Trainings and Seminar Workshops, followed by periodic assessments during the prison stay to ensure that information is accurate and current. A second element of PDL behavior management is requiring them to participate in the Mandatory Programs. A third element is the meeting of PDLs' and give Corrections Order for enrollment in the intensive program. Failure to meet these needs can stimulate defiant and aggressive behavior. A fourth element in managing PDL behavior is defining and conveying expectations for behavior through formal and informal methods of clarifying and holding PDLs accountable for behavioral expectations. Other elements of PDL behavior management are supervision through regular interaction with PDLs and keeping PDLs productively occupied. The implementation of a behavior-management plan includes setting goals for improving PDL behavior; developing a method to measure goal achievement; having clear directives in the form of written policies and procedures; ensuring adequate staffing levels; conducting staff training; monitoring staff to ensure compliance with procedures; documenting all behavior-management activities; implementing reformation programs particularly the ALS education, and developing a communication system among staff regarding matters that affect PDL behavior management.

Being positive and hopeful. Being positive to change and hopeful to return to the society is the great concern of the PDLs. For them, family meant a lot because it gives them hope for they will have somewhere to live in or direction in life when they return to the society, Davis et al (2017).

3.7 Insights Wanting to share in Dealing with the ALS classes

Persevere amid trials. For the PDL learner's perseverance is one of the keys in dealing with the problems in ALS. Most of the PDL learners are suffering from family problem because some of them are married. They always think of what happened to their family and how they can sustain the need of their children. Some of them are working for what they call *barya-barya*. In this way, they may be able to earn and can sustain their personal needs. They can also send money for the need of their family. Research demonstrates that educational activities help PDLs cope with the difficulties of prison life (Hughes, 2009) and decreases boredom (Maruna, 2010),

Need for additional classrooms. The need for additional classroom is also a great challenge for the PDL learners because they cannot focus in listening the lesson. They can hardly get the discussion specially when there is other activity of the reformation program (Garner, 2017).

3.8 Suggestions to Teachers in Education and Training under the Reformation Section Including DepEd Personnel and the Bureau of Corrections inclusive to the ALS Education

To be motivated to teach. The Education and Training personnel would extend their patience in facilitating the class for they know that they are hard headed. They wanted that they will always support them until they finish their education and change themselves as a whole. As a result, the interest of PDL learners is influenced by the motivation of the teacher and PDL teachers, which is an intrinsic value (Garner, 2017).

To have more learning materials. More updated learning materials is of great help for them to gain more knowledge. The fundamental knowledge that students will encounter, discover, and use during a course is provided by the instructional materials. They have the ability to either motivate or disengage PDL students. For greatest impact, such resources must be properly chosen, sorted, developed, and used in a course. To maximize PDL learning, both the breadth and depth of the content should be considered while creating and choosing the instructional materials (Garner, 2017).

3.9 Implications of Future Research.

Inasmuch as the study was limited to the responses of the PDL learners in Maximum Security Compound, Davao Prison and Penal Farm, B.E Dujali Davao Del Norte, the following implications for future research are considered:

First, future research may be conducted by selecting other group of PDL learners coming from Maximum Security Compound. Second, another research of the same focus may be conducted to another compound- Medium Security Compound, or Minimum-Security Compound location to investigate the same phenomenon on understanding Education Behind Bars. Third, a re-interview of the same research participants and informants may be conducted to see whether their understanding about ALS classes have changed over a period of time. Fourth, this study was done in prison. Further research could be done to investigate the same phenomenon among PDL learners. Finally, the findings of the study are viewed from the lens of the selected PDLs research participants and informants. Another research could be conducted to find out the understanding of prison education among the PDL learners of Maximum-Security Compound under the Alternative Learning System.

4. CONCLUSIONS

With ALS classes as main focus of the investigation, the understanding on prison education of PDL learners was highlighted. Understanding the PDL learner about ALS classes, drawn from their experiences, could reinforce the Education and Training and the DEPED personnel in identifying about it. Teachers and Instructional Managers of learning, also take the roles as facilitators to ALS classes. This is especially true in the area of discipline and classroom management and providing support to PDL learners needs.

In spite of security restrictions, education programs in prison are frequently found to be the most effective. It provides meaningful learning experiences and cooperation with the criminal justice system.

Although, there are variety of obstacles to running educational programs and participating in them in prisons like implemented security measures but still ALS programs would help the PDL learners acquire knowledge and skills. This gives the Education and Training Section an opportunity to establish partnership with the Department of Education by trainings and seminar workshop to the Education Personnel and the Instructional Managers to enhance the teaching strategies, plans and programs, and other related prison education programs.

Congestion and overcrowding of PDLs learners though a challenge to Education and Training, but it helps them find an existing control by utilizing chapels and visiting hall as classrooms. It means that facilities, although a necessary, but cannot hinder them to education. Today, the Education and Training is establishing linkage with the Provincial Government for the construction of conducive classroom for the PDL learners.

However, some PDLs found easy to study in prison because there are fewer interruptions. PDLs are more motivated to study, which results to high performance rate. This helps the Education and Training personnel to administer different evaluation technique like oral and written examination and asses output of practical projects.

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