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BALANCING BOOKS AND BELIEFS: EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL BEHAVIORS AND CULTURAL VALUES OF MAGUINDANAON ALS LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

In the context of rapid educational transformation influenced by globalization and technological advancement, learners from Indigenous communities often face the challenge of reconciling formal education with their cultural responsibilities. This study explored the educational behaviors and cultural values of Maguindanaon learners enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat. Using a qualitative research design anchored in a phenomenological approach, the study examined how these learners navigate the intersection of modern educational expectations and the preservation of their cultural identity. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, allowing the participants to share their lived experiences regarding learning, culture, and community engagement. Findings revealed that Maguindanaon ALS learners continuously balance academic engagement with cultural obligations. Despite responsibilities related to family, livelihood, and religious practices, learners demonstrated the ability to integrate technological skills and critical thinking with traditional values, respect for elders, and participation in community life. The flexibility of the

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ALS program enabled learners to pursue education while fulfilling their social and cultural roles. Support from teachers and culturally safe learning environments further strengthened learners' engagement, enabling them to develop resilience, self-discipline, and a sense of responsibility. The study also found that cultural identity significantly influences the learners' attitudes, motivation, and persistence in education. Their pride in being Maguindanaon serves as a source of determination and inspiration to continue learning despite various challenges. Education was perceived not only as a means of academic advancement but also as a tool for preserving traditions, strengthening family and community relationships, and serving as role models for younger generations. Ultimately, the integration of cultural identity with educational experiences allowed learners to construct meaning and purpose in their studies while contributing to the well-being and development of their communities.

Keywords: cultural resilience, community engagement, identity formation, educational inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In today's fast-evolving educational landscape shaped by digital innovation and globalization, Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners from Indigenous communities like the Maguindanaon confront a distinct set of challenges. While the ALS program offers flexible learning opportunities to those outside the formal school system, it still largely promotes standardized curricula that may not fully reflect or support the rich cultural traditions and practices of Maguindanaon learners. As a result, many ALS participants navigate their studies while grappling with a gradual disconnection from their language, customs, and spiritual beliefs.

This tension between education and cultural identity is not unique to the Maguindanaon. Globally, research has highlighted the growing pressure on Indigenous youth to succeed academically while striving to maintain cultural continuity (UNESCO, 2020; Smith & Anderson, 2019). Generation Z ALS learners—often immersed in digital technologies and exposed to global cultures through social media—experience heightened difficulty in reconciling their modern learning environments with their ancestral ways of life (Nguyen et al., 2021; Lee & Park, 2023).

In the Philippine context, the challenge is further compounded by a highly diverse ethnolinguistic landscape and the drive to meet national education standards. While initiatives like the Indigenous Peoples

Education (IPEd) Program aim to make learning more inclusive and culture-sensitive, their implementation often falls short, particularly for Muslim IP groups such as the Maguindanaon (Santos & Cruz, 2022; Reyes, 2020; Garcia et al., 2023). Research focusing specifically on ALS learners—who are already on the educational margins—is especially scarce, leaving a critical gap in understanding how these individuals manage their dual roles as students and cultural bearers.

In Mindanao, especially in areas like Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanaon learners face not only educational challenges but also broader socio-political and cultural tensions. Though some studies have begun to document the experiences of Indigenous youth in formal schools (Abdullah & Hashim, 2019; Talib, 2021), very few have examined how ALS learners—whose educational pathways differ significantly—experience and navigate the intersection of learning and cultural life (Datu et al., 2024). This lack of empirical evidence hinders the development of truly responsive educational models that honor both the learners’ academic aspirations and their cultural heritage.

Aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities), this study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the educational behaviors and cultural values of Maguindanaon Generation Z learners enrolled in the ALS program. By focusing on their lived experiences, this research aims to shed light on how they strive to balance “books and beliefs”—that is, how they manage academic responsibilities while preserving and practicing their cultural identity. The insights gained may serve as a foundation for more inclusive, culturally grounded policies and practices within the ALS and broader educational system.

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Statement of the Problem

This study sought to explore the intersection of education and culture by examining how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat navigate the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Maguindanaon ALS learners in balancing their academic responsibilities with their cultural values and practices?
2. How does the cultural identity of Maguindanaon ALS learners influence their educational attitudes, behaviors, and motivations?
3. In what ways do Maguindanaon ALS learners construct meaning and purpose in reconciling contemporary educational expectations with traditional beliefs and community norms?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, was employed to examine the intersection of education and culture by investigating how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat navigate the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation.

This approach allows the researcher to capture the nuanced ways in which learners negotiate educational expectations alongside cultural values, providing rich, descriptive insights into their behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making processes (Moustakas, 2021). By focusing on the subjective experiences of participants, phenomenology ensures that the complexities of balancing academic and cultural demands are authentically represented.

Respondents of the Study

Table 1 presents the qualifications of the participants based on criteria established by the researcher prior to the selection process.

Table 1

Participants' Inclusion Criteria

Qualifications
<i>Participants: 10 ALS learners and 5 ALS Teachers</i>
Inclusion Criteria for ALS Learners <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Currently enrolled in the ALS program in Lutayan District, Sultan Kudarat during the school year 2025–2026 to ensure relevance to the study context.2. Belong to the Maguindanaon ethnolinguistic group, so that participants share the cultural background necessary to explore the interplay of educational behaviors and cultural values.3. Have attended at least one semester of ALS classes, ensuring sufficient experience to reflect on their educational behaviors and cultural engagement4. Willing to participate and provide informed consent (or assent for minors) and share experiences openly, ensuring ethical compliance and authentic responses.
Inclusion Criteria for ALS Teachers <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Currently teaching in ALS programs in Lutayan District, Sultan Kudarat during the

school year 2025–2026, ensuring direct experience with ALS learners.

2. **At least three years of teaching experience in ALS**, to guarantee familiarity with learners' behaviors, engagement patterns, and cultural contexts.
3. **Directly working with Maguindanaon learners**, ensuring that participants can provide insights specific to the cultural values and educational behaviors of the target group.
4. **Willing to participate and provide informed consent**, confirming readiness to share professional observations and lived experiences relevant to the study.

The participants of this study will be 10 ALS learners, and 5 ALS teachers in Lutayan District, Sultan Kudarat during the school year 2025–2026. Teachers are selected as participants because they directly interact with learners and play a critical role in mediating both academic and cultural experiences.

Sampling Technique

This study will employ a Purposive Sampling Technique to purposefully select 10 ALS learners and 5 ALS teachers in Lutayan District, Sultan Kudarat during school year 2025–2026. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers rely on their own discretion when selecting population members to participate in their surveys (Alchemer, 2021).

This survey sampling method necessitates that researchers have prior knowledge of the purpose of their studies in order to select and approach eligible participants for online survey platforms such as Alchemer. Researchers use purposive sampling to gain access to a specific subset of individuals, as all survey respondents are chosen because they suit a specific profile.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview was utilized in this study as an exploratory tool to be used during the interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) to examine the intersection of education and culture by examining how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat navigate the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation.

This instrument was validated by the panel of evaluators who are experts in the construction of relevant instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study's reliability was ensured through the researcher's strict adherence to a set of protocols. The study **focused** on examining the intersection of education and culture by exploring

how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat **navigated** the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation.

First, the Superintendent of DepEd–Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the CGS were requested to sign a document authorizing the researcher to undertake the necessary steps to conduct the study.

A second authorization letter was sent to the District Supervisor of DepEd Lutayan District in order to obtain the precise data required for the study. A survey questionnaire was created, evaluated, and implemented.

The researcher then selected the respondents using a Purposive Sampling Technique to ensure that all qualified and reliable participants were included in the study. As long as the required health protocols were followed, the researcher began distributing and conducting the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) through face-to-face mode.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the implementation of the study, all proposed procedures and research plans were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc to ensure compliance with institutional guidelines and ethical standards. In addition, the researcher utilized informed consent forms to ensure that all collected data were voluntarily provided by qualified participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study. Individuals who did not wish to participate were neither coerced nor pressured into joining the research.

Participants were interviewed, and Focus Group Discussions were conducted using validated instruments in environments they perceived to be safe, comfortable, and convenient. Efforts were made to minimize or eliminate any potential risks associated with participation. Moreover, participants were given the opportunity to review the collected data to ensure accuracy and transparency. The participants voluntarily contributed their time for interviews lasting approximately thirty (30) minutes to one (1) hour.

The researcher acknowledged the time and effort of the participants by providing a small token of appreciation. In accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, all information gathered from the participants was treated with strict confidentiality, and no identifying details were disclosed to any third parties.

Finally, the data gathered from the interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were collated, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic analysis. See the diagram below.

Data Analysis

A thematic or content analysis was used to analyze the data. This approach involved assigning the participants' assertions, phrases, and words into a system or set of categories, either derived from existing frameworks or developed based on the objectives of the study, as suggested by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). Through this method, patterns and meanings

emerging from the responses were identified, organized, and interpreted to understand the experiences of the participants.

Written interview data were collected from the participants to determine the intersection of education and culture by examining how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat navigated the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation. The collected narratives and responses were carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized to highlight recurring patterns related to learners' cultural identity, educational experiences, and community influence.

Scope and Delimitation

This study focused on exploring the educational behaviors and cultural values of Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Division of Sultan Kudarat during the school year 2025–2026, specifically examining how they balance academic learning with the preservation and practice of their cultural beliefs. The participants of the study were the selected ALS learners who are actively enrolled in the district, as they are in a unique position of navigating both formal education and traditional cultural expectations. The research was conducted in selected ALS centers within Lutayan, using a qualitative phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of learners through interviews and observations.

The study is delimited to Maguindanaon learners only and does not cover other cultural groups or regular students in the formal school system, ensuring focused insights on their distinct experiences. This inquiry is conducted to understand how cultural identity influences learning behaviors and how education can be made more culturally responsive, providing a basis for strengthening ALS programs to be both academically effective and culturally inclusive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In today's fast-evolving educational landscape shaped by digital innovation and globalization, Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners from Indigenous communities like the Maguindanaon confront a distinct set of challenges. In this study, a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, was employed to examine the intersection of education and culture by investigating how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat navigate the dual demands of academic engagement and cultural preservation.

The study reveals that Maguindanaon ALS learners navigate a complex balance between modern education and their cultural responsibilities. They successfully integrate technological skills and critical thinking with traditional values, community participation, and respect for elders, despite challenges such as family duties, livelihood tasks, and religious or cultural obligations. The flexibility of the ALS program supports continued learning, while teacher guidance and culturally safe environments foster engagement and meaningful understanding. This balance promotes personal growth, resilience, responsibility, and a strong sense of cultural identity, allowing learners to apply education for both individual development and community betterment.

Further, the study shows that the cultural identity of Maguindanaon ALS learners strongly shapes their educational attitudes, behaviors, and motivation. Learners draw pride, focus, and perseverance from their Maguindanaon heritage, which guides their discipline, respect for others, and persistence despite challenges. Family and community support reinforce their sense of responsibility, while education serves as a tool for preserving traditions and serving as role models for younger generations.

Finally, it has been shown that Maguindanaon ALS learners construct meaning and purpose in education by integrating their cultural identity, community values, and traditional practices with contemporary learning expectations. Anchoring learning in culture and faith enhances relevance and engagement, while ALS provides opportunities to build self-confidence, resilience, and hope for the future. Education reinforces respect for elders and traditions, promotes community cooperation, and fosters moral, social, and personal growth. Learners perceive education not only as a tool for academic advancement but also as a pathway for communal development, cultural preservation, and the cultivation of purposeful and socially responsible individuals.

Conclusion

The following conclusions were made in light of this study's findings:
Education is most effective when it acknowledges cultural values, supports flexible learning, and empowers learners to integrate knowledge with their identity and societal roles.

Also, culturally responsive approaches not only enhance academic engagement and resilience but also ensure that education strengthens, rather than erodes, the learners' heritage and communal ties.

Finally, it has been concluded that culturally responsive education is most effective when it balances modern educational demands with respect for Indigenous traditions and values. Integrating culture, identity, and community-oriented learning strengthens learner motivation, self-efficacy, and holistic development, demonstrating that education can simultaneously empower individuals and reinforce the cohesion and resilience of the community.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. **DepEd** may develop and provide culturally anchored learning materials and resources that connect modern skills like technology and critical thinking with Maguindanaon traditions, community practices, and faith-based values. Consider mobile learning units or flexible scheduling to accommodate learners with family, livelihood, and religious responsibilities.

2 **School Administrators** may create culturally safe learning spaces where learners feel confident to express ideas while honoring their heritage. Encourage teachers to integrate storytelling, traditional practices, and community projects into lessons to strengthen engagement and make education more meaningful.

3 Policy Makers may allocate targeted funding for ALS programs in Indigenous communities to support infrastructure, teacher training, and community collaboration. Policies should recognize the need for flexibility in scheduling and curriculum design to help learners balance education with cultural responsibilities.

4. IP Communities may continue fostering collective efforts such as bayanihan and mentorship networks, where elders guide youth in blending traditional knowledge with modern education. Encourage families to actively support learners' participation while preserving cultural practices at home.

5. Future Researchers may explore innovative strategies for bridging modern education and cultural preservation, such as localized curriculum development, digital tools that respect cultural values, and longitudinal studies on ALS impact on community empowerment, learner resilience, and cultural continuity.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Before participation in the study, explicit and informed consent was obtained from all individuals involved. Participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and expected benefits. Participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing participants the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any negative consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect the identities and responses of the participants, strict measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Instead of using real names, pseudonyms or identification codes were assigned to participants. All data were securely stored, and access was limited exclusively to the research team.

Avoiding Harm

Sensitive topics, particularly those related to educational struggles and cultural responsibilities, were approached with caution to minimize any emotional or psychological discomfort among participants. Strategies were established to reduce potential distress, and a support mechanism was made available should participants require assistance during the research process.

Researcher–Participant Relationship

Throughout the study, the researcher maintained a professional and respectful relationship with the participants. Any actions that might exploit or harm the participants were strictly avoided, ensuring that the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of each participant were preserved throughout the research process.

Data Protection

All procedures related to data collection, storage, and analysis complied with applicable data protection regulations and policies. Strict protocols were implemented to ensure the safe storage, secure handling, and protected transmission of research data.

Voluntary Participation

Participants were clearly informed that their involvement in the research was completely voluntary. No participant was subjected to coercion, pressure, or undue influence during recruitment or participation.

Researcher Bias

The researcher remained vigilant about potential biases that might influence the process of data collection and analysis. Measures were taken to maintain objectivity, transparency, and methodological rigor throughout the study.

Institutional Approval

Prior to the conduct of the study, the researcher sought and obtained ethical clearance from the appropriate institutional review authorities to ensure that the research adhered to recognized academic and ethical standards.

Honesty and Integrity

All research findings were reported truthfully and accurately. The researcher avoided any manipulation, fabrication, or misrepresentation of the data to ensure the credibility and reliability of the study.

Beneficence

The study carefully considered the potential benefits of the research to educational practices, policies, and community development. The findings were intended to contribute positively to the improvement of educational programs and culturally responsive learning approaches.

Cultural Sensitivity

The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting the customs, beliefs, traditions, and practices of the Maguindanaon community. The research process acknowledged the importance of cultural values and avoided imposing external perspectives that might undermine the participants' cultural identity.

Inclusion and Diversity

The structure of the study prioritized inclusivity and diversity, ensuring that a broad range of perspectives was represented. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the intersection of education and culture by examining how Maguindanaon Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Lutayan, Sultan Kudarat balanced academic engagement with the preservation of their cultural heritage and community responsibilities.

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AI Tools Declaration

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purpose only.

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