

Education behind bars: the experiences and support needs of persons deprived of liberty

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences and support needs of female persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) who participated in the Education Behind Bars (EBB) program implemented by Davao del Sur State College in one of the correctional facilities in the Philippines. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study emphasized the transformative role of education in the rehabilitation and reintegration of PDLs. Data were collected through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed thematically to identify key themes. Findings revealed that PDLs were primarily motivated by hopes for a better future, including aspirations for family stability, economic security, and personal redemption. However, they faced significant challenges such as cognitive and instructional difficulties, as well as limited access to learning materials and digital resources. Despite these obstacles, participation in the program enhanced their academic performance, self-confidence, and motivation. To maximize the rehabilitative potential of the program, the study recommends complementing it with peer mentoring, digital education, and career counseling while expanding opportunities for post-incarceration learning. Correctional education is affirmed as a powerful tool for rehabilitation, underscoring the necessity of strengthening educational support systems within correctional settings. Future research could explore the long-term effects of prison education on employment and recidivism rates, as well as undertake comparative studies of various correctional education models.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right and a powerful tool for individual and societal transformation. In correctional contexts, it serves not only to address knowledge gaps but also to reshape values, perspectives, and life trajectories. Globally, correctional education is recognized for its capacity to reduce recidivism and improve post-release employability. In the United States, studies show that prison education significantly lowers the likelihood of reoffending while enhancing labor market outcomes [1]–[3]. Similarly, in Europe, prison education has been found to support personal growth, build self-confidence, and improve employment prospects after release [4].

This transformative potential is well-aligned with Mezirow's transformative learning theory, which posits that education can lead to a fundamental shift in an individual's worldview through critical reflection and reassessment of previously held assumptions [5]. For persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), such transformation may manifest in increased self-efficacy, redefined life goals, and strengthened social

reintegration prospects. Likewise, self-determination theory underlines the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential psychological needs that, when fulfilled through educational engagement, stimulate intrinsic motivation, personal growth, and resilience [6]. Together, these frameworks offer a theoretical lens for understanding how prison education promotes both personal and socio-economic rehabilitation.

Despite its promise, correctional education faces persistent barriers such as limited access to technology, disruptions caused by security protocols, resource constraints, and individual cognitive or motivational challenges [7]. Incarceration also amplifies self-stigma, which can impede learning and reintegration; however, studies indicate that education mitigates these effects by fostering empowerment, agency, and resilience [8]. Reducing stigma against formerly incarcerated individuals remains vital for enabling them to reclaim meaningful roles in their communities.

Across Southeast Asia, prison education models share similar goals but differ in implementation. In Malaysia, structured academic and vocational training programs have been linked to improved discipline, motivation, and employability among inmates [9]. In Indonesia, the Paket C program, comparable to the Philippines' alternative learning system (ALS), integrates general education with vocational training, leading to lower recidivism rates and better rehabilitation outcomes [10]. These regional parallels highlight that while the Philippines' ALS offers a robust framework, opportunities exist to enhance it by incorporating best practices from neighboring countries, such as embedding stronger vocational components or post-release employment pathways.

In the Philippines, the 1987 constitution affirms the right to education for all, while the Department of Education's ALS provides a flexible, non-formal learning pathway for out-of-school youth, adults, and PDLs. The ALS combines literacy instruction, life skills, and an accreditation and equivalency (A&E) system that enables learners to earn elementary or secondary-level certification [11], [12]. Research shows that ALS is particularly effective in increasing literacy rates and offering second-chance education to marginalized populations [13].

Building on this framework, Davao del Sur State College has implemented the Education Behind Bars (EBB) program in a correctional facility in Digos City. This program enhances the ALS curriculum with supplementary tutorials, counseling, and mentorship tailored to the needs of persons deprived of liberty (PDLs), aiming to empower them with education, life skills, and psychosocial support for successful reintegration. Yet, research on PDL learning experiences and support needs in the Davao del Sur context remains scarce.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the motivations, challenges, perceptions, and support needs of female PDLs enrolled in the EBB program. Anchored in Transformative Learning Theory and Human Capital Theory, the study seeks to inform policy and program design for more effective rehabilitation strategies and reduced recidivism rates in the Philippines. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

- What factors motivated PDLs to enroll in ALS education?
- What challenges did PDLs face while studying in the ALS?
- How do PDLs perceive the impact of the EBB program?
- What additional support does PDLs need to succeed in their education and improve their lives?

2. METHOD

The study was conducted in one of the correctional facilities in the Philippines. This facility serves as a detention center for female PDLs who are enrolled in the ALS and participate in the EBB program of Davao del Sur State College. This particular setting provided a controlled and secure environment conducive to exploring the educational experiences and support needs of incarcerated women engaged in both formal and non-formal education.

To effectively capture these experiences, a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was employed to explore the depth and complexity of participants lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions. The study focused exclusively on female PDLs because the EBB program was implemented only in the female ward at the time of the research. Moreover, women in detention often face unique educational barriers and gender-specific rehabilitation needs that differ from those of male inmates.

For the purpose of this study, 12 female PDLs were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively enrolled in both the ALS and the EBB program. Exclusion criteria included those not participating in these programs, individuals with medical or psychological conditions that could hinder participation, and those unwilling to provide informed consent. Efforts were also made to include participants with varied ages, educational backgrounds, and lengths of program participation to capture diverse perspectives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30-40 minutes in a private room within the facility to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Participants primarily responded in the Bisaya dialect, and these responses were carefully translated into English while preserving their original meanings and nuances. Interview questions explored participants’ motivations for enrolling in ALS, the challenges they encountered, perceptions of the program’s effectiveness, and suggestions for improvement. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached at the 10th interview, with two additional interviews conducted to confirm that no new themes emerged. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

The analysis was guided by Braun *et al.* [14], six-phase framework of thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which participants reviewed transcripts and preliminary interpretations for accuracy. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a detailed audit trail of methodological decisions and coding processes. Confirmability was supported through peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts who reviewed coding accuracy and thematic alignment. Transferability was facilitated by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants. Triangulation was achieved by comparing interview data with program documents and observation notes.

Finally, ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were fully informed of the study’s objectives, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any stage. Confidentiality was safeguarded by anonymizing personal data and securely storing all records. Sensitivity and respect were maintained throughout data collection to protect participants’ dignity and emotional well-being.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion organized into themes and sub-themes derived from the participants’ narratives. Their statements, originally communicated in Bisaya, have been carefully translated into English while preserving their intended meaning. The analysis draws from their lived experiences, highlighting key patterns and insights relevant to the study’s objectives through thematic analysis.

3.1. Motivations of PDLs in enrolling ALS education

The motivations of PDLs for engaging in educational programs while incarcerated are diverse and deeply personal, reflecting both immediate and long-term aspirations. Many PDLs pursue education as a pathway toward a better future, seeking to improve their circumstances through knowledge and skills acquisition. This analysis reveals two major thematic categories, as summarized in Table 1 aspirations for a better future, which includes the sub-themes of family and future security and educational and economic advancement; and personal growth and redemption, which encompasses self-improvement and redemption as well as purpose and fulfillment.

Table 1. Thematic matrix showing motivations for enrolling in ALS education

Main theme	Sub-themes	Core ideas
Aspiration for a better future	Family and future security	Desire to secure a better future for oneself and family through education
	Educational and economic advancement	Pursuit of educational qualifications and improved job prospects for economic growth
Personal growth and redemption	Self-improvement and redemption	Longing for personal growth, healing, and transformation through education
	Purpose and fulfillment	Seeking personal fulfillment, meaning, and a sense of purpose post-incarceration

3.1.1. Aspirations for a better life

The first theme, “aspirations for a better life”, highlights the intrinsic motivation of PDLs to improve their circumstances through education. This theme aligns closely with self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core drivers of motivation [6]. PDLs’ desires to create a brighter future for themselves and their families, achieve personal and economic progress, and prepare for successful reintegration into society reflect these motivational components.

Two sub-themes emerge under this main theme: family and future security and educational and economic advancement. The sub-theme family and future security reflect the participants’ strong drive to enhance their family’s well-being and ensure a more stable future through education. For example, PDL4

stated, *“I want to finish my studies so I can show my family that despite being here, I did not waste my time. I want to make them proud and give them hope that I can still provide for them after I get out.”* This narrative illustrates how family responsibilities serve as powerful incentives for educational engagement, consistent with research demonstrating that concern for family welfare motivates individuals to overcome adversity and continue learning [15].

The sub-theme educational and economic advancement captures participants’ belief that education is key to securing stable employment and long-term financial security. PDL2 expressed this conviction: *“I am determined to keep studying because I know that without education, it will be hard to find a steady job after my release. I want to build a future where I can support myself and my family, and education is the only way I see to achieve that.”* This perspective supports findings that higher educational attainment significantly improves employability and economic outcomes, especially for marginalized populations facing systemic barriers [16].

Education emerges as a critical rehabilitative tool, enabling PDLs to secure financial stability and fulfill family obligations. Their strong motivation to pursue education underscores its essential role in poverty reduction and breaking the cycle of incarceration. To maximize these benefits, academic and vocational programs should be tailored to meet the employment needs of PDLs, thereby enhancing job readiness and promoting sustainable reintegration.

3.1.2. Personal growth and redemption

The second theme, personal growth and redemption, highlights the transformative impact of education on PDLs. Education serves as a powerful vehicle for self-improvement, moral reflection, and renewed purpose during incarceration. This theme is composed of two sub-themes: self-improvement and redemption and purpose and fulfillment.

The sub-theme self-improvement and redemption illustrates how participants pursue education to make amends and reconstruct their identities. PDL5 reflected, *“Before I entered this program, I felt lost and ashamed of my past mistakes. But learning new things and focusing on my studies gave me hope that I can change for the better. Education is helping me become someone my family and I can be proud of.”* This testimony reveals that education acts as a crucial catalyst for healing emotional wounds and nurturing positive self-identity. This process aligns closely with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, which explains how critical reflection can lead to a fundamental shift in worldview and self-concept [5]. Research confirms that prison education programs provide incarcerated individuals with direction and opportunities to reshape their identities constructively [17]. Moreover, engagement in education facilitates cognitive and behavioral development, which is vital for successful societal reintegration [18].

The sub-theme purpose and fulfillment emphasize education as a source of hope, motivation, and psychological strength during imprisonment. Participants described education not merely as academic pursuit but as an essential element that fills emotional voids and sustains their resilience. PDL3 disclosed, *“When I study, I forget about the walls around me for a while. It gives me a reason to keep going and a vision for a better future. Education fills the emptiness and gives me strength.”* This account aligns with studies indicating that educational programs in prison enhance mental health by cultivating optimism and a sense of achievement [19]. Through transformative learning, PDLs develop new perspectives that support emotional healing and psychological restoration, enabling them to overcome despair and feelings of worthlessness [20].

Education serves as a vital catalyst for profound personal transformation and renewed purpose among PDLs by enabling transformative learning experiences that reshape their self-identity and worldview. This development of cognitive and behavioral capacities through education is essential for effective rehabilitation and smooth reintegration into society. Consequently, correctional policies must prioritize expanding and tailoring educational programs to meet the unique needs of incarcerated individuals. Doing so not only supports their mental and emotional well-being but also equips them with the necessary skills and resilience to break the cycle of incarceration, thereby reducing recidivism and enhancing their chances of leading meaningful and productive lives after release. Integrating these educational efforts with psychosocial support services will further increase their rehabilitative effectiveness.

3.2. Challenges of PDLs experience while studying in the ALS

This section presents the findings and discussion related to the challenges PDLs encounter while studying in the ALS. The difficulties faced by PDLs are multifaceted, impacting their ability to effectively engage with the educational program. The analysis identifies two major themes as shown in Table 2 cognitive and instructional challenges, with sub-themes difficulty in understanding lessons and memory retention issues; and material and resource constraints, with sub-themes lack of educational materials and impact of resource shortages on learning.

Table 2. Thematic matrix on challenges of PDLs in ALS education

Main theme	Sub-themes	Core ideas
Cognitive and instructional challenges	Difficulty in understanding lesson	Struggles with comprehending lessons due to varying learning capacities
	Memory retention issues	Difficulty in retaining and recalling information due to cognitive constraints
Material and resource constraints	Lack of library resources	Limited access to textbooks, learning aids, and other essential printed and digital educational resources
	Resource shortages in learning	Scarcity of learning materials such as notebooks, ballpens, papers, and other learning materials that hinder effective learning

3.2.1. Cognitive and instructional challenges

The first major theme, cognitive and instructional challenges, reflects the learning difficulties faced by PDLs enrolled in the ALS. These challenges hinder their ability to comprehend and retain lessons, ultimately affecting their academic progress and self-confidence. Two sub-themes emerged under this category: difficulty in understanding lessons and memory retention issues.

Difficulty in understanding lessons was a recurring concern, particularly when participants encountered unfamiliar terminology or complex concepts. PDL1 described, *“Some lessons become confusing when I hear technical terms for the first time, and I have to pause repeatedly to understand the meaning, which makes me feel frustrated and worried about falling behind.”* This illustrates how unfamiliar academic language acts as a cognitive barrier, increasing learners’ frustration and anxiety, which may reduce motivation. Such challenges are consistent with literature indicating that learners with interrupted educational histories face greater comprehension difficulties when exposed to new concepts [21].

Memory retention issues also significantly hindered learning. While participants often understood lessons during instruction, many struggled to recall information afterward. PDL8 shared, *“I can follow the lesson in class, but the next day or during self-study, the details fade from my mind, forcing me to relearn and causing frustration and exhaustion.”* This highlights how stress, lack of reinforcement, and limited access to learning materials impair memory consolidation, obstructing cumulative learning. Research supports that high-stress environments negatively affect cognitive functions, including memory retention [22].

Addressing these cognitive and instructional challenges requires educational programs to adapt instructional materials and teaching methods to gradually introduce complex terminology and scaffold learning. Incorporating frequent review, cognitive support techniques, and creating a less stressful learning environment can enhance memory retention and comprehension. Personalized teaching approaches, remedial support, and multisensory instructional methods that accommodate diverse learning styles can boost engagement and improve academic outcomes. Ultimately, such strategies empower PDLs to overcome learning barriers, increase their academic success, and better prepare for reintegration into society.

3.2.2. Material and resource constraints

The second theme, material and resource constraints, highlights how limited access to learning materials impedes the academic progress of PDLs. Two sub-themes emerged: lack of library resources and resource shortage in learning, both underscoring the critical role of essential educational tools in supporting learning. Without these tools, PDLs face significant barriers to fully engaging with the ALS curriculum.

Regarding the lack of library resources, participants reported insufficient textbooks, learning aids, and digital materials necessary for effective study. For example, PDL6 conveyed, *“We only have a few donated old books here, and most are not related to our lessons, which makes it difficult to study and prepare well.”* This shortage limits learners’ ability to explore topics beyond classroom instruction and restricts deeper engagement with the curriculum. Such challenges align with research emphasizing the importance of access to relevant educational materials in fostering academic success [23].

Resource shortages also affected participants’ everyday learning, with many citing the lack of basic supplies such as notebooks and pens as major obstacles. PDL6 stressed, *“Sometimes I cannot take notes because I do not have a notebook or pen, so I struggle to remember lessons.”* This absence of essential materials impedes note-taking, assignment completion, and active participation, thereby negatively impacting academic performance and learner motivation. Studies consistently show that inadequate educational resources correlate with reduced student engagement and lower achievement levels [24], [25].

Despite educators’ dedication and patience, the persistent shortage of materials slowed comprehension and academic progress. Learners often needed extra time to grasp concepts that would have been easier with sufficient resources. This material scarcity, coupled with the stressful environment, can also negatively impact PDLs’ mental health and motivation to learn. To address these issues, coordinated policies are needed to guarantee PDLs’ access to essential textbooks, stationery, and digital learning tools. Strengthening partnerships among correctional facilities, BJMP, Department of Education, Commission on

Higher Education (CHED), and non-governmental organizations can help fill resource gaps. Additionally, integrating digital and self-paced learning modules offers alternative educational pathways despite material shortages. Incorporating mental health support services within educational programs is crucial to enhance learners' well-being and academic performance. Furthermore, establishing post-release education pathways will facilitate continuous learning and reintegration, contributing to reduced recidivism and improved societal outcomes. Implementing these measures will significantly enhance ALS programs' effectiveness and support the holistic rehabilitation of incarcerated learners.

3.3. Perception of PDLs on the impact of the EBB program

This section examines how the EBB program, particularly its tutorial and counseling sessions, has influenced the PDLs' educational experiences and outcomes of PDLs. By analyzing participants' perceptions, the program's effectiveness in enhancing learning and fostering personal growth has become evident. Two major themes were generated: enhanced learning and understanding with sub-themes improved knowledge and skills and better comprehension of lessons; and increased confidence and motivation with sub-themes boosted self-esteem and inspiration and determination as reflected in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic matrix on the impact of the EBB program

Main theme	Sub-themes	Core ideas
Enhanced learning and understanding	Improved knowledge and skills	Gaining new skills and expanding knowledge through educational opportunities
	Better comprehension of lessons	Improved understanding of lessons and content learned through the program
Increased confidence and motivation	Boosted self-esteem	Increased self-confidence and belief in one's abilities, leading to positive personal development
	Inspiration and determination	Feeling inspired and motivated to make positive changes and reintegrate into society

3.3.1. Enhanced learning and understanding

The EBB program significantly improved the academic learning and understanding of PDLs through personalized tutorials and structured lessons. One sub-theme, improved knowledge and skills, highlights how participants gained practical competencies applicable both inside and outside prison. For example, PDL9 articulated, *"I learned many new things that I can use when I get out of here, not just for work but also for handling everyday situations better."* This demonstrates how the program equips learners with relevant skills that enhance their ability to reintegrate into society, supporting findings that correctional education fosters practical competence essential for post-release success [26]. The second sub-theme, Better Comprehension of Lessons, reflects enhanced understanding through clear explanations and repeated practice. PDL12 disclosed, *"The teacher explained lessons step-by-step, and I practiced until I fully understood and felt confident applying what I learned."* Such structured, repetitive teaching addresses learning gaps common among incarcerated individuals with interrupted schooling, aligning with research showing tutorial methods improve comprehension and academic outcomes [27], [28]. These improvements in understanding increase learners' confidence and engagement.

Taken together, the EBB program's personalized and structured approach effectively enhances both knowledge acquisition and lesson comprehension, contributing to the holistic development of PDLs. Policy implications include expanding tailored tutorial programs within correctional facilities. Additionally, integrating mental health services and establishing post-release education pathways are crucial to sustain academic gains, promote well-being, and reduce recidivism among incarcerated learners.

3.3.2. Increased confidence and motivation

The EBB program notably enhanced participants' self-esteem and motivation, which are critical to both their academic progress and personal development. Two sub-themes emerged from participant responses: boosted self-esteem and inspiration and determination. For instance, PDL1 revealed, *"Before, I was shy to answer, afraid I might be wrong, but now I can speak up in class because I believe in myself more."* This improvement in self-confidence reflects how supportive educational environments and mentorship promote positive self-perception, encouraging learners to actively engage in their studies and overcome previous academic anxieties [29]. Additionally, the program inspired participants to maintain commitment and set personal goals for the future. PDL6 commented, *"Every lesson makes me more eager to learn because I know this will help me when I return to my family and community."* This increased motivation is explained by self-determination theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and

relatedness as essential drivers of intrinsic motivation and enhanced academic achievement. These findings also align with research emphasizing the role of self-efficacy in sustaining learners' determination and improving educational outcomes [30]. By fostering both confidence and motivation, the program contributes to the holistic growth and long-term success of incarcerated learners.

From a policy perspective, integrating peer mentoring and career counseling into correctional education can reinforce learners' confidence and motivation beyond their incarceration period. Incorporating psychological support services will further promote self-efficacy and emotional well-being, which are vital in reducing recidivism. Collaborative efforts among agencies are essential to institutionalize these support mechanisms, ensuring that incarcerated learners receive comprehensive educational and personal development opportunities that facilitate successful reintegration into society.

3.4. Support needed by PDLs to succeed in their education and improve their lives

PDLs face distinct challenges, requiring tailored support. Table 4 presents three major themes related to their support needs: educational resources (basic learning materials and technological tools), emotional and mental health support (mental health counseling and emotional well-being), and support to higher education (college education opportunities and scholarships and family and community support).

Table 4. Thematic matrix on the support needs of PDLs

Theme	Sub-themes	Core ideas
Educational resources	Basic learning materials	Consistent access to essential learning supplies is necessary Digital tools, including computers and internet access are crucial in addressing stress and trauma
	Technological tools	
Emotional and mental health support	Mental health counseling	Professional counseling services are vital for addressing stress and trauma
	Emotional well-being	A supportive environment promotes self-worth, resilience, and academic success
Support for higher education	College education opportunities	Access to degree programs aligned with future goals is critical
	Scholarships and financial aid	Economic support helps sustain academic progress.
	Family and community support	Reconnecting with family and community enhances motivation for reintegration

3.4.1. Educational resources

Access to fundamental educational materials is a critical need for PDLs participating in the EBB program. The sub-theme basic learning materials emerged from participant responses emphasizing the importance of notebooks, pens, and writing tools for completing assignments and staying engaged. For example, PDL4 declared, *"It's hard to focus when you don't even have a notebook to write on. Once we get these materials, we can follow the lessons better."* This highlights how the lack of essential resources impedes concentration and academic participation. Research confirms that sufficient educational materials enhance student performance and foster a positive learning environment [31]. Providing these tools is foundational for equitable access to education within correctional settings.

The second sub-theme, technological tools, reflects participants' recognition of digital tools as vital for expanding learning opportunities and engagement. PDL10 explained, *"If we could access computers or tablets, we could search for information ourselves and learn more beyond what's in the module."* This statement illustrates the potential of technology to facilitate independent learning and broaden educational horizons. However, the absence of such technological resources remains a major barrier. Studies emphasize that digital technologies enrich learning by offering interactive content, diversified resources, and personalized instruction, all of which improve educational outcomes [32]. Recent findings further highlight that integrating accessible and well-supported technological tools significantly enhances learner autonomy, boosts engagement, and equips students with essential skills for navigating a technology-driven society [33].

Addressing these gaps requires policy measures that guarantee consistent provision of both basic educational materials and digital tools to PDLs. Partnerships between correctional institutions and educational agencies such as BJMP, Department of Education, and CHED can facilitate access to learning platforms and technologies. Embedding digital literacy and technology-enhanced learning into correctional education will not only strengthen academic progress but also better prepare learners for reintegration into an increasingly digital world. Ensuring adequate educational resources is, therefore, fundamental to advancing both the academic success and rehabilitation outcomes of incarcerated learners.

3.4.2. Emotional and mental health support

Providing mental and emotional support is crucial for the academic success and personal growth of PDLs enrolled in the EBB program. The sub-theme mental health support emerged from participants' recognition of counseling services as vital for managing stress, anxiety, and trauma, which often obstruct learning. For instance, PDL11 noted, *"Sometimes I feel heavy inside because of my problems, but talking to the counselor makes me lighter, and I can concentrate on the lessons."* This highlights the role of counseling in alleviating psychological burdens and improving focus. Research corroborates that access to mental health services fosters emotional stability and resilience, directly benefiting academic performance [34].

The sub-theme emotional well-being reflects the importance of a supportive and encouraging learning environment. Participants like PDL9 affirmed, *"When the teachers and staff encourage us, I feel that my life still has value, and it makes me want to try harder in class."* Such emotional encouragement promotes self-worth and motivation, which are essential for sustained engagement in learning. Studies confirm that emotional well-being enhances cognitive functioning by reducing stress and improving concentration, which positively affects academic outcomes [35], [36].

Policy implications suggest integrating regular mental health counseling, peer support groups, and emotional wellness programs into correctional education initiatives. These measures can effectively address psychological barriers and maintain motivation, helping learners build resilience necessary for rehabilitation and reintegration. Collaboration between correctional institutions, BJMP, DepEd, CHED, and mental health agencies is recommended to institutionalize these services, ensuring comprehensive care for incarcerated learners. Ultimately, supporting both emotional and cognitive needs enhances educational achievement and fosters holistic development within prison education programs.

3.4.3. Support for higher education

This theme reflects the recognition that higher education serves as a crucial avenue for personal growth, rehabilitation, and societal reintegration for PDLs. Several participants expressed a strong desire to pursue college degrees as a means to secure better employment and improve their quality of life after release. PDL3 commented, *"If I could finish my degree, I could prove to others and to myself that my past does not define my future,"* highlighting the transformative potential of higher education. However, economic barriers were a recurring concern. Many declared that financial assistance would allow them to focus on academics without the constant burden of expenses, as voiced by PDL5 who conveyed, *"A scholarship would allow me to focus on studying instead of worrying every day about how to pay for everything."* This emphasizes the urgent need for targeted funding mechanisms to sustain educational engagement among PDLs. Empirical evidence supports these findings, as financial aid has been shown to significantly increase enrollment and completion rates among disadvantaged populations, with such assistance for PDLs not only promoting academic persistence but also improving reintegration prospects [37]–[39].

Equally significant was the role of family and community encouragement in sustaining motivation to study. Several participants signified that emotional and moral support from loved ones was instrumental in overcoming obstacles. As one PDL7 echoed, *"My family keeps reminding me that education is my key to a better life,"* while PDL9 noted, *"Even my community friends send me messages to keep going, and it gives me hope."* Research corroborates that active family and community involvement fosters resilience, enhances academic performance, and reinforces a learner's commitment [40], [41]. The convergence of these narratives points to a policy imperative: programs should integrate financial support with structured family and community engagement strategies. Addressing both economic and socio-emotional barriers would maximize the potential of higher education as a rehabilitation pathway for PDLs, contributing to both personal transformation and societal reintegration.

4. CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insights into the motivations, challenges, and needs of PDLs participating in the EBB initiative under the ALS. The findings reveal that PDLs are driven by deeply personal aspirations, viewing education as a means for growth, moral renewal, and a redefined sense of purpose. Despite this strong motivation, participants face significant obstacles including cognitive difficulties, instructional challenges, and limited access to essential learning materials and resources. The positive impact of the EBB program is evident in improved learning and comprehension, increased confidence, and enhanced motivation. Nonetheless, the findings also emphasize the need to expand educational materials, mental health services, and opportunities for continued education to fully support PDLs' development.

To enhance the program's effectiveness, strengthening partnerships with higher education institutions can provide clear pathways to college degrees and vocational training. Expanding scholarship opportunities and implementing technology-driven learning platforms are crucial for improving accessibility.

Additionally, engaging families and a community plays a vital role in sustaining motivation and facilitating successful reintegration. Adopting learner-centered teaching methods such as visual aids, interactive approaches, personalized tutoring, and memory-enhancing activities can help address cognitive challenges. Furthermore, integrating mental health support, life skills training, and post-release job placement services is essential to improve rehabilitation outcomes and reduce recidivism.

This study highlights the transformative power of education within correctional settings as a means to restore dignity, foster hope, and enable meaningful societal reintegration. It calls on policymakers, educators, and non-governmental organizations to collaborate and invest in comprehensive educational programs that nurture both academic skills and emotional resilience. Future research should examine the long-term effects of correctional education on employment, social reintegration, and recidivism. Investigations into differentiated instructional strategies and the integration of digital technologies can provide valuable insights into overcoming educational barriers and enhancing learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking the EBB graduates would further inform policy and practice, supporting the continuous improvement of prison-based education at the national level.

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- C : **C**onceptualization
- M : **M**ethodology
- So : **S**oftware
- Va : **V**alidation
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- I : **I**nvestigation
- R : **R**esources
- D : **D**ata Curation
- O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
- E : Writing - Review & **E**ditng
- Vi : **V**isualization
- Su : **S**upervision
- P : **P**roject administration
- Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper. The authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

The authors have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research involving human subjects complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies, following the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration. This study was approved by the Davao del Sur State College Research Ethics Committee, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines for human research.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [AET], upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive nature of the data involving Persons Deprived of Liberty, access to data is restricted to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.




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