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Assessing the effectiveness of alternative learning system in Zambia: A systematic approach to educational change and sustainability

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Abstract

The effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia is crucial in addressing educational disparities and promoting inclusive learning opportunities. This study systematically examined the effect of ALS on learners who are unable to access formal education due to socio-economic, geographical, or personal barriers. By analyzing program implementation, curriculum relevance, learner outcomes, and sustainability measures, the study evaluated how ALS contributes to educational equity and lifelong learning. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study was conducted in four higher learning institutions within Lusaka district, Zambia. The sample consisted 110 respondents and the data collection process involved distributing the questionnaires and conducting individual interviews to the selected participants. The quantitative data collected were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS and Microsoft excel whereas the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the implementation of alternative learning systems in Zambia has demonstrated significant potential in addressing educational access and equity, particularly for marginalized groups such as rural and out-of-school youth. Additionally, while alternative learning systems contribute to educational inclusivity, sustainability remains a challenge. Key factors hindering long-term success include insufficient funding, inconsistent policy support, and a lack of adequate training for facilitators. The study therefore recommended for a comprehensive policy frameworks, targeted investment, and capacity-building initiatives to ensure continued effectiveness and scalability.

Keywords: Alternative Learning; Educational Change; Sustainability and Systematic Approach; Zambia

1. Introduction

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia has emerged as a crucial strategy to bridge educational gaps and provide inclusive learning opportunities for marginalized groups, including out-of-school youth, adults, and individuals in remote areas. As traditional education systems face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-economic barriers, ALS offers flexible and innovative solutions to ensure lifelong learning and skills development (Mwase et al., 2020). This study seeks to assess the effectiveness of ALS by systematically examining its impact on educational access, learner outcomes, and sustainability. A comprehensive evaluation of curriculum adaptability, instructional methods, learner engagement, and policy support will provide insights into the strengths and limitations of ALS in Zambia. By identifying best practices and areas for improvement, this research aims to contribute

to the development of a more resilient and inclusive education system that aligns with national and global education goals, ultimately fostering social and economic development.

Alternative learning is a systematic approach to educational change and sustainability that seeks to provide flexible, inclusive, and context-driven learning opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings (Zohaib et al., 2024a) It encompasses diverse models such as open and distance learning, community-based education, and competency-based training, which cater to learners with varying needs, backgrounds, and learning paces. This approach promotes lifelong learning by integrating technology, experiential learning, and interdisciplinary methods to enhance accessibility and relevance. Additionally, alternative learning contributes to educational sustainability by addressing barriers such as socioeconomic inequalities, geographical limitations, and rigid curricula that often exclude marginalized groups. Zguir et al (2021) in their study noted that by fostering innovation, critical thinking, and adaptability, it prepares learners for dynamic career landscapes while promoting equitable and inclusive education systems. Governments and institutions play a crucial role in institutionalizing alternative learning through policy frameworks, partnerships, and resource allocation, ensuring its effectiveness and long-term impact.

Warburton (2003) say that educational change is a complex and systematic process that requires a structured approach to ensure sustainability and long-term impact. It involves deliberate efforts to reform policies, teaching methodologies, curricula, and institutional practices to improve learning outcomes and address emerging educational challenges. A systematic approach to educational change emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts among stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, students, parents, and the broader community, to create a shared vision for improvement (Zohaib et al., 2024b). This approach integrates research-based strategies, continuous professional development for teachers, and the use of technology to enhance instruction and learning experiences. Additionally, sustainable educational change requires adaptability, ongoing assessment, and the ability to respond to societal and technological advancements. By fostering a culture of innovation, inclusivity, and evidence-based decision-making, education systems can remain responsive to the needs of diverse learners while ensuring equity and quality education for all (Yadav, et al., 2022).

A systematic approach to educational change and sustainability in Zambia requires a well-structured, inclusive, and evidence-based framework that aligns with national policies, stakeholder involvement, and long-term development goals. Sililo & Nyirenda (2024) say that this approach involves a continuous cycle of assessing the existing educational landscape, identifying key challenges, designing strategic interventions, implementing reforms, and evaluating their impact for necessary adjustments. The Zambian government, through the Ministry of Education, has introduced policies such as the National Education Policy and Vision 2030, which emphasize quality education, equity, and innovation to promote sustainability. Key elements of this systematic approach include teacher professional development, curriculum reforms, integration of technology, and community engagement to ensure holistic and lasting transformation. Moreover, partnerships with non-governmental organizations, private sector stakeholders, and international agencies play a crucial role in mobilizing resources and expertise for effective implementation (Chanda et al., 2024a). Sustainable educational change in Zambia also requires addressing socio-economic disparities, improving infrastructure, and fostering an adaptive learning culture that accommodates diverse learners. By embracing a data-driven and participatory approach, Zambia can ensure that educational reforms lead to long-term benefits, fostering economic growth, social cohesion, and national development.

Sustainability as a systematic approach to educational change in Zambia emphasizes the integration of long-term strategies that ensure continuous improvement and resilience within the education sector. This approach involves aligning policies, curriculum, and teaching methodologies with sustainable development goals to create an education system that meets present and future needs (Gaweł et al., 2024). Key aspects include promoting environmental awareness, digital transformation, and inclusive education to cater to diverse learners. Additionally, sustainability in educational change requires robust policy frameworks, effective teacher training, and community involvement to foster a culture of lifelong learning. Financial investment in infrastructure, technology, and human capital is crucial to ensuring that educational reforms are not only implemented but also maintained over time (Hung, 2023). Addressing challenges such as resource constraints, inequities in access to education, and the digital divide is essential for achieving sustainable educational change. Ultimately, a systematic approach to sustainability in education ensures that reforms lead to long-term positive outcomes, equipping learners with the skills and knowledge necessary for societal and economic development in Zambia.

1.1. Statement of the problem

The Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia has emerged as a crucial mechanism for addressing educational disparities by providing flexible learning opportunities for out-of-school youths and adults. However, its effectiveness

in promoting educational change and sustainability remains a subject of concern due to challenges such as inadequate funding, lack of trained facilitators, limited learning materials, and inconsistent policy implementation (Mwansa et al., 2025). While ALS aims to bridge the educational gap and foster lifelong learning, its integration within the formal education framework and its long-term impact on learners' skills development and employability require systematic evaluation (Mwinyi, 2024). Hence, the study sought to assess the effectiveness of ALS in Zambia by examining its accessibility, curriculum relevance, learner outcomes, and overall contribution to sustainable educational development. By adopting a systematic approach, this study provided insights into best practices, identify areas for improvement, and offer policy recommendations to enhance the impact and sustainability of the Alternative Learning System in Zambia.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

- To evaluate the effect of the Alternative Learning System on educational outcomes in Zambia.

- To analyze the sustainability and scalability of the Alternative Learning System in addressing educational disparities and improving access to quality education in Zambia.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) Theory. The theory provides a valuable framework for assessing the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia, particularly in understanding how learners and educators adopt and utilize technology in non-traditional educational settings. TAM posits that two primary factors perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) influence users' acceptance and adoption of technology. In the context of ALS, PU reflects the extent to which learners and educators believe that technology-enhanced learning improves educational outcomes, while PEOU determines how effortlessly they can navigate digital learning platforms. Mutisya & Makokha (2016) added that these factors are critical in evaluating the success of ALS initiatives, as technological adoption is often influenced by digital literacy levels, accessibility of resources, and attitudes toward e-learning. Furthermore, external variables such as infrastructure availability, government support, and institutional policies shape the overall acceptance of technology within Zambia's ALS framework. A systematic approach to educational change and sustainability requires continuous assessment of these elements, ensuring that technological tools are effectively integrated into alternative learning strategies. By applying TAM, policymakers and educators can identify barriers to adoption, develop targeted interventions to enhance technology acceptance, and create sustainable educational models that improve learning opportunities for marginalized and underserved populations. Thus, TAM serves as a critical analytical tool in understanding and promoting the long-term viability of ALS in Zambia.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia, offering valuable insights into its role in promoting educational change and sustainability. By systematically evaluating the impact of ALS on learners' academic achievements, skills development, and overall accessibility to education, the study contributes to evidence-based policymaking and program improvements. It highlights the strengths and challenges of the system, providing a foundation for enhancing its efficiency and scalability to reach marginalized and out-of-school populations. Furthermore, the study's findings can inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders on best practices for integrating ALS into the national education framework, ensuring its alignment with Zambia's long-term educational goals. By addressing critical factors such as curriculum design, teacher preparedness, and resource allocation, this research fosters a more inclusive and sustainable education system, ultimately contributing to national development and social equity.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The systematic approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) in Zambia by combining statistical analysis with in-depth contextual insights. The study was conducted in four higher learning institutions within Lusaka district, Zambia. The sample consisted 110 respondents; 10% of the target population 1100. The population for the study was purposefully drawn from the selected institutions. Stratified random sampling was used to select students (100; 25 from each selected institution) and educators (20; 5 from each selected institution) while purposive sampling was used to select policymakers (6) and administrators (4; 1 from each selected institution) to gain expert insights. The data collection process involved distributing the questionnaires to the selected participants and conducting individual interviews. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaires were analyzed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics using SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) and Microsoft excel whereas the qualitative data from semi structured interviews were analyzed thematically.

The study upheld research ethical considerations such as voluntary participation of the respondents, confidentiality, honesty, and right of privacy.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. The Effect of the Alternative Learning System on Educational Outcomes in Zambia

According to research findings, Access to Education was seen to be highest at representing 40%, Retention and Completion Rates at 25%, Academic Performance and Skill Development at 20% and Transition to Higher Education or Employment at 15%. Figure 1 below summarized these findings.
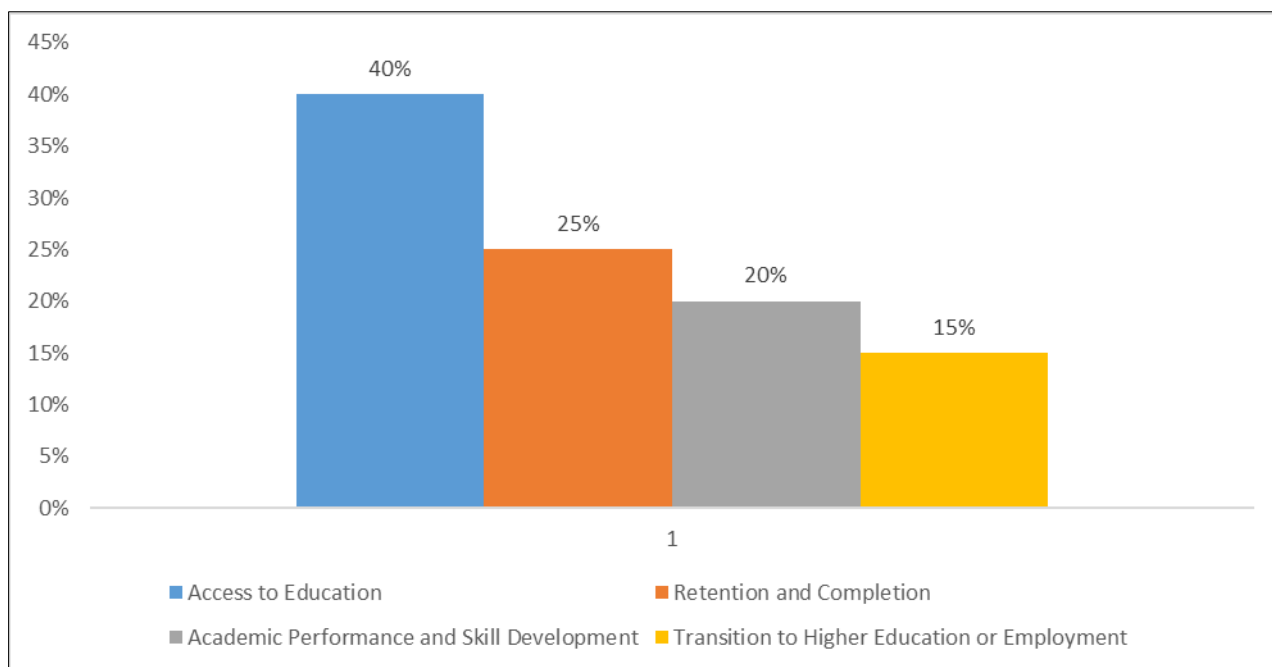

Figure 1 The Effect of the Alternative Learning System on Educational Outcomes in Zambia

The findings revealed that the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia has significantly contributed to improving access to education, particularly for marginalized groups such as out-of-school youth, adult learners, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. By offering flexible learning schedules, community-based education centers, and distance learning opportunities, ALS bridges the gap for individuals who are unable to participate in the conventional education system. This inclusivity ensures that learners who may have dropped out due to financial constraints, early marriages, or geographical barriers still have an opportunity to attain literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills (Abebe & Asfaw, 2020). Furthermore, the integration of technology in ALS, through radio, online platforms, and mobile learning, has expanded the reach of educational services, especially in rural and remote areas. Consequently, the system fosters lifelong learning and enhances the overall literacy rates in Zambia, contributing to national development by equipping more individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary for economic and social participation (Chanda, 2024b).

Despite these advancements, challenges still hinder the full realization of the ALS's potential impact on educational outcomes in Zambia. Limited funding and resources often result in inadequate teaching materials, insufficient trained educators, and poor infrastructure, which affects the quality of education provided under ALS programs. Additionally, the lack of formal recognition for ALS graduates in some employment sectors and higher learning institutions undermines its effectiveness in promoting long-term academic and professional growth. Societal perceptions that view alternative education as inferior to conventional schooling further discourage some learners from fully engaging in the program. Addressing these issues through policy reforms, increased investment, and public awareness campaigns can enhance the effectiveness of ALS in improving access to education and ensuring that all Zambians, regardless of their background, have a fair chance at academic and career advancement (Kunda et al., 2018).

The findings also noted that the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia has played a significant role in improving retention and completion rates among learners who face barriers to traditional education (Chanda, 2024c). By providing flexible learning opportunities tailored to diverse needs, ALS has enabled students especially out-of-school youth, working adults, and marginalized groups to remain engaged in the education system. One of the administrators explained that:

-"The integration of non-formal education methods, such as community-based learning centers and distance education, has helped reduce dropout rates by addressing socio-economic challenges, early marriages, and financial constraints that often force learners to abandon their studies-".

Moreover, ALS programs often incorporate skills-based training, making education more relevant and practical, thus increasing student motivation to persist in their studies. Abdelrahim et al (2025) alluded that this adaptability has resulted in improved retention rates, as learners who might otherwise have left school prematurely can now access an education system that accommodates their personal circumstances.

Boateng & Agyemang (2020) noted that completion rates have also shown improvement due to the structured yet flexible nature of ALS, which allows students to progress at their own pace without the rigid timelines of formal education. The provision of alternative pathways, including adult literacy programs and vocational training, ensures that learners who re-enter the education system can complete their studies despite previous disruptions. Government and non-governmental initiatives supporting ALS, such as financial assistance and mentorship programs, have further contributed to higher completion rates by reducing economic hardships and providing learners with necessary resources (Diana, 2012). However, challenges remain, including inadequate funding, limited availability of learning materials, and a shortage of trained facilitators, which can hinder the effectiveness of ALS in fully bridging educational gaps. Despite these obstacles, the ALS continues to serve as a crucial intervention in promoting educational attainment, helping more learners transition from basic education to higher learning or gainful employment (Zohaib et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the results showed that the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia has also significantly influenced academic performance by providing flexible and inclusive educational opportunities for learners who may have been excluded from formal schooling. By offering non-traditional learning pathways, such as community-based education, vocational training, and distance learning, ALS enables students to acquire essential knowledge and skills at their own pace (Mwansa et al., 2025). One of the policy makers noted that:

-"This flexibility has been particularly beneficial for working adults, school dropouts, and marginalized populations, ensuring that they continue their education despite socio-economic challenges. As a result, learners under the ALS framework often exhibit improved literacy and numeracy skills, leading to better academic performance-".

Moreover, tailored teaching methods that focus on practical and real-world applications help students grasp complex concepts more effectively than in conventional classroom settings, thereby enhancing their overall educational outcomes.

Chanda et al (2024b) in their study observed that beyond academic performance, ALS also plays a crucial role in skill development by equipping learners with practical and vocational competencies that align with the demands of the labor market. Many ALS programs incorporate technical and entrepreneurial training, preparing students for self-employment and formal job opportunities. This skill-based approach not only enhances employability but also fosters self-reliance and economic empowerment (Dube et al., 2023). Furthermore, the integration of digital literacy and life skills training ensures that learners develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication abilities, which are essential for both professional and personal growth. By bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, ALS contributes to the holistic development of learners, ultimately improving their socio-economic prospects and fostering lifelong learning in Zambia.

The findings further revealed that the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia plays a crucial role in facilitating the transition of learners to higher education or employment, particularly for those who have been unable to access or complete formal schooling. By providing flexible and inclusive education pathways, ALS equips learners with essential academic qualifications and vocational skills necessary for further studies or job opportunities (Ekselsa et al., 2023). Many ALS programs incorporate practical training, literacy and numeracy development, and life skills education, which enhance students' readiness for tertiary education institutions or the labor market. Kamba (2015) added that the integration of vocational training into ALS curricula is particularly beneficial in bridging the gap between education and employment, ensuring that learners gain industry-relevant competencies that improve their employability prospects.

Additionally, partnerships between ALS providers, technical colleges, and employers have facilitated smoother transitions by offering career guidance, mentorship programs, and job placement initiatives.

Despite these benefits, challenges remain in ensuring a seamless transition from ALS to higher education or employment. Limited recognition of ALS certificates by some tertiary institutions and employers often hinders graduates from fully capitalizing on their education. Additionally, financial constraints, inadequate career counseling services, and societal perceptions of non-formal education create barriers that affect ALS graduates' access to further learning or decent work opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires stronger policy support, increased investment in ALS infrastructure, and greater collaboration between government agencies, employers, and educational institutions (Johnson & Parker, 2019). Enhancing the accreditation and standardization of ALS programs, alongside improving public awareness of their value, can further strengthen the role of ALS in fostering successful educational and career transitions for learners in Zambia.

3.1.1. Challenges and Barriers to the Alternative Learning System on Educational Outcomes in Zambia

According to study findings, limited funding and inadequate infrastructure pose significant challenges to the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia, ultimately affecting educational outcomes. The lack of sufficient financial resources restricts the expansion and sustainability of ALS programs, limiting the availability of essential learning materials, qualified instructors, and technology-driven solutions (Chanda & Phiri, 2024). Many ALS initiatives rely heavily on donor funding, which is often inconsistent and unsustainable, making it difficult to maintain program continuity. Furthermore, budget constraints hinder the development of well-equipped learning centers, forcing many learners to study in under-resourced facilities or even informal settings. This lack of investment in ALS reduces the quality of education provided, leading to low learner motivation, high dropout rates, and limited opportunities for skills development. Kim & Lee (2020) say that without adequate funding, ALS struggles to reach marginalized populations, including out-of-school youth and adults who require flexible and accessible learning pathways.

Additionally, poor infrastructure remains a fundamental barrier to the success of ALS programs, particularly in rural and low-income areas of Zambia. Many learning centers lack basic amenities such as electricity, internet connectivity, and adequate classroom space, making it difficult to implement modern, technology-enhanced teaching methods (Mutisya & Makokha, 2016). The absence of digital learning tools and resources further limits learners' exposure to essential 21st-century skills, widening the educational gap between ALS participants and those in mainstream education (Chanda et al., 2024c). In areas where ALS programs exist, overcrowding and poor learning conditions discourage consistent attendance and engagement. Moreover, inadequate transport networks make it challenging for learners in remote areas to access ALS centers, further restricting educational opportunities. Addressing these infrastructure challenges requires targeted government investment, policy reforms, and stronger collaboration between stakeholders to ensure that ALS can effectively contribute to inclusive and equitable education (Chaleta et al., 2021).

Additionally, the availability of qualified educators and instructional materials remains a significant challenge to the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia. Many ALS programs are designed to provide flexible and accessible education to marginalized learners, including out-of-school youth and adults who missed formal schooling. However, the shortage of well-trained educators with expertise in alternative pedagogies limits the quality of instruction. One of the administrators observed that:

-"Many ALS facilitators lack specialized training in adult education, differentiated instruction, and the use of innovative teaching methodologies that cater to diverse learning needs-".

Furthermore, the high turnover of educators due to low remuneration and lack of job security further disrupts learning continuity. This is in line with Chanda (2024d) who stated that this results in inconsistent instructional delivery, affecting learners' motivation, retention, and overall educational outcomes. The lack of structured professional development programs for ALS educators also contributes to ineffective teaching practices, making it difficult for learners to acquire essential literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills necessary for lifelong learning and employability.

In addition to educator shortages, the scarcity of instructional materials poses a significant barrier to effective ALS implementation in Zambia. Many alternative learning centers lack access to well-developed curricula, textbooks, and digital resources tailored to the needs of non-traditional learners (Iwamoto et al., 2021). Limited government funding and inadequate resource allocation to ALS programs further exacerbate this problem, making it difficult to provide quality educational materials. Without sufficient learning resources, educators struggle to engage learners effectively,

leading to poor academic performance and low completion rates (Kunda et al., 2018). Moreover, the reliance on outdated and rigid instructional materials often fails to address the practical and contextual learning needs of ALS students, limiting their ability to acquire relevant knowledge and skills. Addressing these challenges requires strategic investment in educator training, provision of adequate instructional resources, and policy reforms that prioritize the expansion and sustainability of alternative education programs in Zambia.

The respondents also pointed out that one of the significant challenges facing the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia is the social perception and recognition of ALS qualifications. Many individuals, including employers, higher education institutions, and even some community members, tend to view ALS certifications as inferior to those obtained through traditional formal education. Mtebe & Raphael (2021) explained that this perception stems from the belief that alternative learning lacks the rigorous academic and skill-based training that conventional schooling provides. As a result, ALS graduates often struggle to gain acceptance into higher learning institutions or secure meaningful employment, which limits their upward mobility and economic opportunities. The societal stigma surrounding ALS qualifications discourages many potential learners from enrolling in the program, fearing that their efforts may not yield tangible benefits (Nakabugo et al., 2019). This creates a vicious cycle where ALS remains undervalued, preventing its graduates from fully integrating into mainstream educational and professional spheres.

Furthermore, the limited recognition of ALS qualifications by policymakers and educational authorities further exacerbates this issue. Despite the efforts to standardize ALS curricula and assessments, there is still a lack of clear policies that equate ALS credentials with those of traditional schooling (Sendall, 2018). Employers and institutions often hesitate to recognize ALS graduates due to concerns about the credibility and consistency of their learning experiences. This lack of formal recognition undermines the effectiveness of ALS as an alternative pathway to education, making it harder for graduates to transition smoothly into further studies or employment. Peters et al (2021) say that to address this challenge, there is a need for increased advocacy, public awareness, and policy reforms aimed at enhancing the credibility and acceptance of ALS qualifications. Bridging this gap will require collaboration between government bodies, private sector stakeholders, and educational institutions to ensure that ALS graduates receive the same opportunities as their traditionally educated counterparts.

3.2. The Sustainability and Scalability of the Alternative Learning System in Addressing Educational Disparities and Improving Access to Quality Education in Zambia

3.2.1. The Sustainability of the ALS in Zambia

The findings revealed that Government and policy support play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia. The government's commitment to inclusive education is reflected in policies that promote lifelong learning opportunities for out-of-school children, youth, and adults (Chanda et al., 2024d). By integrating ALS into the national education framework, the government can allocate adequate funding, provide teacher training, and ensure curriculum development aligns with the needs of diverse learners. Additionally, strong policy frameworks facilitate partnerships between the government, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies to enhance the reach and effectiveness of alternative education programs. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms established through policy support help in assessing the impact of ALS initiatives, ensuring continuous improvement and adaptation to emerging educational challenges. Moreover, the inclusion of ALS in national education strategies fosters community engagement and awareness, encouraging local participation in the implementation and sustainability of these programs. Thus, consistent government backing through policy formulation, financial investment, and institutional support is essential for the long-term success and sustainability of the Alternative Learning System in Zambia (Mumbi & Nyirenda, 2024).

Furthermore, the sustainability of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia is heavily dependent on the availability and quality of infrastructure and resources. Adequate learning spaces, including classrooms, community centers, and mobile learning units, are essential to accommodate learners who may not have access to formal education. Additionally, the provision of necessary learning materials such as textbooks, digital resources, and teaching aids is crucial in ensuring effective learning experiences (Leal Filho et al., 2023). The integration of technology, including access to computers and internet connectivity, can further enhance the efficiency and reach of ALS programs, particularly in remote and underserved areas. Moreover, well-trained educators and facilitators, along with continuous professional development, play a key role in maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the system. Sustainable funding and resource allocation from both government and non-governmental organizations are necessary to maintain and expand ALS initiatives. Without adequate infrastructure and resources, the effectiveness of ALS in addressing educational gaps and promoting lifelong learning opportunities may be compromised, making it imperative for stakeholders to invest in and prioritize these critical components (Siddiqui et al., 2020).

In addition, community and stakeholder engagements play a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia by fostering collaboration, resource mobilization, and long-term commitment to education. Effective engagement of local communities, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector stakeholders enhances the relevance and accessibility of ALS programs, particularly for marginalized and out-of-school learners. One of the educators stated that:

-"Community participation in decision-making processes helps tailor learning initiatives to local needs, ensuring cultural sensitivity and alignment with socioeconomic realities"-.

Also, partnerships with stakeholders contribute to financial and technical support, such as infrastructure development, provision of learning materials, and capacity building for educators (Chanda et al., 2025). Engaging parents and guardians foster a supportive home environment, reinforcing the importance of continued education. Furthermore, collaboration with employers and industry players ensures that ALS curricula incorporate practical and vocational skills, increasing employability prospects for learners. Through sustained stakeholder involvement, the ALS can effectively address barriers to education, promote lifelong learning, and contribute to Zambia's broader educational and development goals.

3.2.2. Scalability of ALS in Zambia

The results findings recorded that integration with formal education plays a crucial role in the scalability of Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) in Zambia by creating pathways for learners to transition seamlessly between non-formal and formal education structures. By aligning ALS curricula with national education standards, learners who complete ALS programs can be reintegrated into mainstream schools or higher education institutions without facing significant academic disparities. Khrutba et al (2024) added that this integration ensures that ALS is not seen as an isolated or inferior alternative but rather as a complementary approach to achieving universal education goals. Additionally, partnerships between ALS providers, government agencies, and formal educational institutions can facilitate credit recognition, standardized assessments, and teacher training, enhancing the credibility and acceptance of ALS. Effective integration also allows for the use of shared resources, such as classrooms and digital learning tools, which improves cost-efficiency and sustainability (Tondeur et al., 2017). Furthermore, integrating ALS with formal education supports the inclusion of marginalized populations, such as out-of-school youth and adult learners, by offering flexible learning opportunities that cater to diverse educational needs. Ultimately, a well-integrated ALS system strengthens Zambia's education sector by expanding access, promoting lifelong learning, and contributing to national development efforts.

Additionally, the use of digital and blended learning has emerged as a key strategy for scaling the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia, addressing challenges related to accessibility, teacher shortages, and resource limitations. One of the students commented that:

-"Digital learning platforms, including online courses, mobile applications, and interactive e-learning modules, provide flexible learning opportunities for out-of-school youths and adult learners who may not have access to traditional education. By integrating face-to-face instruction with digital tools, blended learning enhances engagement and comprehension while allowing them to study at their own pace"-.

Wachira et al (2019) supported this finding by stating that this approach also expands the reach of ALS programs to rural and underserved communities, where physical infrastructure and qualified educators are often lacking. Furthermore, the scalability of ALS through digital and blended learning is supported by the increasing availability of internet access, government initiatives promoting e-learning, and partnerships with educational technology providers. However, challenges such as digital literacy gaps, inconsistent electricity supply, and affordability of devices must be addressed to maximize the effectiveness of these learning models (Chanda et al., 2024e). By leveraging technology in ALS delivery, Zambia can enhance educational inclusivity and ensure that more learners, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, have access to quality education.

3.2.3. ALS in Addressing Educational Disparities and Improving Access to Quality Education in Zambia

According to study results, Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) play a crucial role in addressing educational disparities and improving access to quality education for marginalized groups in Zambia. Many children and youth, particularly those from rural areas, low-income backgrounds, and vulnerable communities, face significant barriers to formal education due to poverty, disability, gender discrimination, or social exclusion. ALS provides flexible and inclusive educational opportunities, such as community schools, adult literacy programs, distance learning, and vocational training, allowing marginalized learners to acquire essential knowledge and skills outside the conventional school system (Robinson et al., 2019). These programs bridge the gap by offering tailored curricula, accommodating different

learning needs, and integrating life skills and entrepreneurship training to enhance employability. Moreover, ALS initiatives often involve partnerships with government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations to provide learning materials, teacher training, and infrastructural support, ensuring sustainability and effectiveness (Bissonnette et al., 2019). By expanding educational access through ALS, Zambia can reduce dropout rates, promote lifelong learning, and empower disadvantaged populations with the tools needed for economic and social mobility, ultimately contributing to national development and poverty reduction.

Furthermore, gender inclusivity in Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) is crucial for addressing educational disparities and improving access to quality education in Zambia. In a country where gender inequalities persist, especially in rural areas, ALS provides an opportunity for marginalized groups, including girls and women, to access education in non-traditional settings (Chanda, 2024e). By focusing on flexible learning models that cater to diverse needs, ALS can offer a more supportive environment for girls who may face barriers such as early marriage, pregnancy, and cultural expectations. Incorporating gender-sensitive curricula, training female educators, and fostering an inclusive learning environment are key strategies for empowering girls and women. Dube et al (2023) added that these efforts not only help in overcoming traditional educational barriers but also promote gender equality by ensuring that both genders benefit equally from educational opportunities. Moreover, ALS can improve educational outcomes for both genders by providing a tailored approach that addresses the unique challenges faced by each learner, thereby contributing to the overall improvement of the education system in Zambia.

The findings also revealed that Alternative Learning Systems (ALS) have demonstrated significant outcomes and effectiveness in addressing educational disparities and improving access to quality education, particularly for marginalized and underserved populations. By providing flexible and non-traditional learning opportunities, ALS ensures that individuals who are unable to participate in formal education due to socio-economic constraints, disabilities, or geographic barriers can still acquire essential knowledge and skills (Kamba, 2015). One of the administrators narrated that:

"One of the key outcomes of ALS is the increased literacy and numeracy rates among out-of-school youth and adult learners, which enhances their employability and socio-economic mobility"-.

Additionally, ALS promotes lifelong learning by offering skill-based and competency-driven curricula that align with workforce demands, thereby empowering learners to become self-reliant. The effectiveness of ALS is further strengthened by its use of innovative teaching methods, such as blended learning, community-based instruction, and modular approaches, which cater to diverse learning needs and preferences (Mtebe & Raphael, 2021). Moreover, ALS programs often incorporate civic education and social development initiatives, fostering a sense of inclusivity and active citizenship. While challenges such as inadequate funding, teacher shortages, and inconsistent policy implementation persist, the overall impact of ALS in reducing educational inequalities and expanding access to quality learning opportunities remains substantial, making it a crucial mechanism for achieving education for all.

4. Recommendations

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study;

4.1.1. Strengthening Policy Frameworks and Funding

The government should establish clear policies that integrate the Alternative Learning System (ALS) into the national education framework, ensuring sustainability.

4.1.2. Enhancing Curriculum and Pedagogical Approaches

The Ministry of Education through curriculum developers should ensure that ALS curriculum is flexible, competency-based, and aligned with national education standards while incorporating vocational and digital skills.

4.1.3. Strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation, and Community Engagement

Learning institutions should encourage community participation to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and enhance local support for ALS initiatives.

5. Conclusion

The assessment of the effectiveness of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in Zambia highlights its significant role in promoting educational access, inclusivity, and lifelong learning opportunities for marginalized and out-of-school individuals. Through a systematic approach, ALS has demonstrated its potential to bridge educational gaps by providing flexible learning models tailored to diverse learners' needs. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, limited resources, and inconsistencies in policy implementation hinder its full impact. Strengthening ALS requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving government agencies, educators, communities, and international partners to ensure sustainability and long-term success. Investing in teacher training, curriculum development, and technological integration will enhance the system's effectiveness and scalability. Ultimately, a well-supported ALS can serve as a transformative mechanism for achieving Zambia's educational goals, fostering economic development, and empowering individuals with essential knowledge and skills for the future.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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