

Learning beyond barriers: A phenomenological study towards an intervention framework for the junior high open high school program



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Abstract This study explores the lived experiences, challenges, strengths, and areas for improvement of the Junior High Open High School Program (OHSP) in the Sta. Fe-San Jose District through a phenomenological approach. By capturing the perspectives of both learners and teachers, the study sheds light on the program's ability to provide inclusive and flexible educational opportunities while addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalized populations. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes for both learners and teachers: challenges and hindrances, strengths and benefits, and areas for improvement. Learners highlighted financial struggles, logistical issues, and personal responsibilities as key challenges, while teachers emphasized the lack of incentives, insufficient training, and limited resources. Despite these challenges, both groups demonstrated resilience and determination. Learners valued the program's flexibility, which enabled them to balance education with work and personal responsibilities, while teachers found fulfillment in supporting students' progress and commended the program's inclusivity. However, critical areas for improvement were identified, including the need for financial assistance, specialized training for teachers, improved learning materials, and enhanced institutional support. The findings align with relevant literature, emphasizing the importance of systemic reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and tailored interventions to enhance the program's impact. This study concludes that while the OHSP has made significant strides in addressing educational gaps, its full potential can be realized through sustained efforts to improve institutional resources, foster teacher development, and provide learners with equitable support. The study's implications extend to educational policy, practice, and management, advocating for collaborative approaches among stakeholders to ensure the program's sustainability and effectiveness. Ultimately, the OHSP serves as a transformative model for addressing the educational needs of underserved populations, contributing to broader goals of equity and community development.

Keywords: OHSP, phenomenology, learners' experiences, teachers' experiences

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental right that ensures individuals can become productive and engaged members of society. Equal access to quality and relevant basic education remains central to achieving social equity, and recent scholarship highlights the importance of expanding open and flexible modes of learning to reach marginalized learners (Demirbilek, 2024). In recent years, the educational landscape has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the delivery of teaching and learning. This shift is driven by the need to accommodate diverse learner profiles and address barriers that hinder access to traditional schooling.

Alternative delivery modes such as the Open High School Program (OHSP) have emerged to provide flexible, independent, and learner-centered opportunities for those unable to participate in conventional schooling due to financial, geographical, physical, or social constraints. Research affirms that open and distance modes of learning are effective in creating equitable and inclusive pathways to education (Demirbilek, 2024). In the same way, conceptual work on open schooling highlights the need to reconceptualize such programs within a multidimensional framework that accounts for learner autonomy, institutional support, and flexible assessment (Sarid et al., 2025).

Recent studies on open and distance education have also introduced targeted interventions such as modular redesign, enhanced mentoring, and capacity-building for teachers to sustain learner engagement and program quality (Taguba, 2023; Yañez et al., 2025). These findings emphasize that successful open schooling models depend on consistent institutional support and the professional readiness of teachers to guide learners who balance multiple responsibilities. Moreover, effective

interventions require integrating financial and psychosocial assistance to ensure retention, reflecting global initiatives that link open education with equity and social inclusion goals.

The increasing adoption of technology and distance learning further enhances these initiatives. Studies indicate that online and open modes can foster 21st-century skills when appropriately supported by teachers and institutions (Alismail & Alyoussef, 2023). However, challenges persist, particularly around student engagement, as boredom and disengagement have been found to significantly affect adolescent learners in online and flexible programs (Chansaengsee & Suksakulchai, 2023).

To understand these challenges more deeply, phenomenology provides an essential theoretical foundation for exploring how learners construct meaning within flexible and technology-supported environments. Grounded in the philosophical works of Husserl and Moustakas, the phenomenological approach seeks to uncover the *essence of lived experience* by setting aside researcher biases through *epoché* and *intentional reflection*. In education, this perspective enables researchers to describe how learners interpret and respond to their experiences, revealing social, emotional, and contextual dimensions often overlooked in quantitative analyses (Byrne, 2025).

Phenomenological inquiries in related educational contexts emphasize the importance of meaning-making and lived experiences, providing deeper insights into how learners perceive and navigate alternative delivery systems (Erbaş et al., 2025). In addition, scoping reviews of distance education highlight recurring issues of access, motivation, and institutional readiness that remain relevant for open schooling initiatives (Schweighart & Gstrein, 2024). These works collectively support the need for phenomenological research that not only documents experiences but also connects them to policy-relevant interventions capable of improving open learning environments.

At the local level, the Open High School Program has been implemented in three secondary schools within the District of Sta. Fe-San Jose. These schools are San Jose Agricultural High School (SJAHS), Santa Fe National High School (SFNHS), and Tranquilino Cawaling Sr. National High School (TCSNHS). The program was adopted as a response to dropout rates averaging 3.25 percent across three consecutive school years (2021–2023).

The objectives of this study are: (i) to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students enrolled in the Open High School Program in the District of Sta. Fe-San Jose, (ii) to identify the challenges faced by learners in the implementation of the OHSP, (iii) to examine the strengths and opportunities of the OHSP as perceived by learners, and (iv) to recommend enhancements to strengthen the delivery and impact of the OHSP. In line with these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions: (i) What are the lived experiences of junior high school learners under the Open High School Program? (ii) What challenges do learners encounter in the implementation of the program? (iii) What strengths and opportunities are evident in the OHSP as perceived by learners? and (iv) What recommendations can be drawn to improve the Junior High Open High School Program in the District of Sta. Fe-San Jose?

A schematic diagram was developed to illustrate the conceptual flow of the study (Figure 1), beginning with the overarching aim to enhance inclusivity and effectiveness. At the input stage, the focus is on the learners and teachers in the Sta. Fe–San Jose Open High School Program (OHSP) and their lived experiences, which provide the foundation for examining how the program operates in practice. This input proceeds to the process, represented as qualitative research, where phenomenological methods such as semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and trustworthiness criteria are applied to ensure that raw experiences are systematically analyzed and validated. The outputs are then reflected in three interrelated components: exploring lived experiences and challenges, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and providing recommendations for program enhancement. Together, these stages demonstrate how the study moves from data collection to meaningful analysis and, ultimately, to evidence-based insights. Addressing a gap in the literature, particularly the scarcity of phenomenological studies on the lived experiences of junior high school learners in the Philippine OHSP context, this inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of program effectiveness while offering practical recommendations for improvement.

The strengthened theoretical framing and review of interventions underscore that exploring lived experiences through phenomenology is essential to refining open schooling programs. This approach not only reveals the personal realities of learners and teachers but also guides context-responsive reforms aimed at improving flexibility, equity, and sustainability in the Open High School Program.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a transcendental phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of learners and teachers in the Junior High Open High School Program (OHSP) in the Sta. Fe-San Jose District. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences by setting aside researcher biases through bracketing and *epoché*. Recent scholarship emphasizes that educational research benefits from a rigorous application of phenomenological principles to ensure authentic representation of participants' voices (Byrne, 2025). This methodological orientation enabled the study to illuminate the realities of learners and teachers, focusing on challenges, strengths, and opportunities for

improvement in the OHSP. Following Moustakas’ (1994) and Byrne’s (2025) guidance, reflexive journaling and analytical memos were maintained throughout the process to document evolving insights and researcher reflections. These served as audit evidence of how pre-understandings were bracketed and interpretations grounded in participants’ words rather than assumptions.



Figure 1 Schematic Diagram of the Study.

2.2. Participants, Sampling, and Instruments

The participants consisted of thirty individuals purposively selected to provide information-rich accounts relevant to the objectives of the study. Fifteen were junior high school learners, aged 15 to 18 years and enrolled in Grades 7 to 10 at the time of the study, while the other fifteen were teachers who had at least one year of teaching experience in the OHSP across different grade levels. Purposive sampling ensured diversity in gender, grade level, and school environment, allowing maximum variation in perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using guides specifically designed for learners and teachers. Learners were asked about their experiences, strengths, challenges, and suggestions for program enhancement, while teachers were asked about instructional practices, resource allocation, and professional challenges. To ensure the validity of the instrument, two experts in OHSP implementation and two qualitative researchers reviewed the interview questions. Their feedback was incorporated to refine the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. The inclusion of both learners and teachers allowed triangulation across participant groups, enhancing the credibility and depth of findings as recommended by Tavakol (2025).

2.3. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Before the conduct of fieldwork, ethical clearance was obtained from the Division of Romblon, and permission was secured from school heads. Participants were formally invited and gave informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any point in the process. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet and private settings to promote comfort and openness, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Field notes were also taken to document contextual details and non-verbal cues that enriched the interview data. Where necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify participants’ responses and strengthen the credibility of the findings. Observational notes were cross-referenced with interview data to validate recurring themes and reduce reliance on a single data source, reinforcing dependability and confirmability (Tavakol, 2025).

2.4. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, following updated methodological guidelines (Tavakol, 2025). The analytic process began with immersion in the data through repeated readings of transcripts, followed by systematic coding of significant statements. Codes were then clustered into categories, which were synthesized into broader themes representing



learners’ and teachers lived experiences. Themes were reviewed for coherence, refined, and contextualized using relevant literature to ensure depth and scholarly grounding. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, an audit trail, and reflexive journaling. These strategies correspond to the four established criteria of rigor in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through triangulation of interviews, field notes, and participant feedback, keeping interpretations grounded in participants’ perspectives (Byrne, 2025; Tavakol, 2025). Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the setting and participants, helping readers assess relevance to other contexts. Reflexive notes documented researcher assumptions, decisions, and insights that guided theme development, ensuring transparency. Member checking allowed participants to confirm and refine the study’s interpretations. Together, these strategies enhanced trustworthiness and ensured that the findings genuinely reflected participants lived experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Table 1 shows that most OHSP learners are adolescents aged 15–18, predominantly male, and spread across Grades 7–10, with the largest number in Grade 10. Their parents generally attained only elementary or high school education, with some having no formal schooling, and nearly all families earn ₱5,000 or below monthly, indicating disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Enrollment in OHSP is mainly due to work responsibilities, family obligations, health concerns, or logistical challenges such as distance and transportation. These demographics highlight the realities that push learners into alternative schooling: the need to balance study with survival, caregiving, and mobility limitations. Such findings resonate with Taguba (2023), who noted that low income, health, and distance are common barriers to traditional schooling, and with Yañez et al. (2025), who reported that learners in OHSP often struggle with financial and logistical constraints affecting their participation and performance. These findings show that financial difficulty, parental education, and family obligations are not simply background factors but major influences that shape learners’ educational paths. As Demirbilek (2024) pointed out, socioeconomic limitations affect how learners view and engage with education. The OHSP, therefore, serves as more than a learning system; it becomes a means to equalize opportunities for those facing poverty and exclusion.

Table 1 Profile of Learners in the Open High School Program (OHSP).

Category	Description	Distribution
Age	Mostly adolescents aged 15–18 years	12 out of 15 (5 aged 15, 4 aged 16)
Gender	Male-dominated cohort	10 Male, 5 Female
Grade Level	Spread across Grades 7–10	Grade 7: 3, Grade 8: 3, Grade 9: 3, Grade 10: 6
Parents’ Educational Attainment	Predominantly elementary and high school level; some with no formal schooling	Mothers: 9 with elementary or high school; 2 with none. Fathers: 7 with elementary or high school; 2 with none
Family Monthly Income	Largely from disadvantaged households	14 families earning ₱5,000 or below; 1 family ₱5,000–₱10,000
Reasons for Enrollment	Work, family, health, and logistical challenges	7 working students; 2 teenage parents/health reasons; 2 family responsibilities; 2 logistical barriers

Despite these limitations, the OHSP profile also suggests resilience and adaptability. Learners facing socioeconomic hardship and family responsibilities still pursue education, echoing Yano and Gallego’s (2025) finding that OHSP participation can foster socio-economic advancement, confidence, and self-esteem when supported by flexible systems. The presence of more male than female learners may indicate gendered dynamics in participation, warranting exploration of whether domestic roles create greater pressure on female learners, as highlighted by Tabaosares and Castillo (2024) in their study on strand, gender, and socioeconomic influences in SHS immersion. From a phenomenological perspective, these demographic realities reveal that students view education not only as an academic pursuit but also as a deeply personal effort to transform their lives. Their persistence shows how learning becomes a source of hope and purpose, consistent with Byrne (2025), who described education as both a social and emotional experience. Overall, the demographic profile underscores the intersection of poverty, parental education, and multiple responsibilities in shaping learners’ experiences, aligning with current literature that calls for context-sensitive interventions and holistic support to ensure that alternative education programs can meet the diverse needs of marginalized students.

Table 2 shows that most teachers in the Open High School Program are mid-career, with 45% aged 30–39 and 15% aged 20–29, while fewer are older, indicating a relatively young teaching force. The profile also reveals a female-dominated teaching population (10 female, 5 male), consistent with broader trends in basic education where women outnumber men in teaching positions. A concentration of teaching assignments is evident in the upper grade levels, particularly Grade 10, suggesting that these teachers handle students closer to completing junior high school and thus manage more complex academic demands. In terms of qualifications, the majority hold master’s degrees, four have bachelor’s degrees, and one holds a doctoral degree.



Most are ranked Teacher I or II, with only one Master Teacher, and six have served between one to five years in OHSP, showing that many are relatively new to this specialized program.

Table 2 Profile of Teachers in the Open High School Program (OHSP).

Category	Description	Distribution
Age	Predominantly mid-career	45% aged 30–39, 15% aged 20–29, fewer older
Gender	Female-dominated teaching force	10 Female, 5 Male
Grade Level Taught	Concentration in upper levels	Balanced, with 6 teaching Grade 10
Academic Qualification	Mostly Master’s level; some with advanced degrees	Majority Master’s level; 4 Bachelor’s; 1 Doctoral
Academic Rank	Mostly early career	Teacher I and II majority; only 1 Master Teacher
Length of Service in OHSP	Many relatively new	6 with 1–5 years’ service
Performance Rating	Consistently high	15 rated Very Satisfactory or Outstanding

Despite being relatively early in their careers, these teachers consistently receive high performance ratings, with all 15 rated either Very Satisfactory or Outstanding. This implies strong professional dedication despite challenges linked to alternative education settings. Recent studies support this finding: Yañez et al. (2025) noted that OHSP teachers face difficulties such as irregular attendance of learners and limited learning resources, yet they demonstrate commitment to adapting teaching strategies. Similarly, Taguba (2023) emphasized that teacher adaptability is crucial in overcoming barriers like socioeconomic and logistical constraints of learners. The female-dominated profile aligns with national trends identified by Tabaosares and Castillo (2024), who observed that women continue to comprise the majority in the teaching workforce, particularly in junior and senior high school levels. Overall, the demographic profile suggests that OHSP teachers are qualified, motivated, and resilient, but also relatively new to the program, highlighting the need for sustained professional development and institutional support to strengthen their long-term effectiveness.

3.2. Matrix of Thematic Analysis for Learners

The thematic analysis revealed three major domains, namely challenges and hindrances, strengths and benefits, and areas for improvement. Learners most frequently cited financial struggles, with 11 of 15 respondents reporting difficulty balancing school responsibilities with economic pressures such as work and family support. This confirms the assertion of Nasr et al. (2024), who found that financial stress not only limits students’ academic performance but also undermines their mental health and overall well-being. Similarly, transportation costs and long travel distances emerged as logistical barriers for some respondents, further compounding financial strain. However, Squibb (2023) suggested that initiatives such as open educational resource (OER) programs can help offset costs by reducing textbook expenditures, though this may not sufficiently address non-tuition expenses such as transportation and daily sustenance. The learners’ stories show that their struggles with money are not isolated issues but central to their daily experience of schooling. Financial hardship is not just about the absence of resources; it affects motivation, concentration, and the sense of belonging in school. From this perspective, addressing financial barriers should go hand in hand with emotional and institutional support that enables learners to persist with dignity and hope. Thus, while OER initiatives reduce financial burdens in one aspect, they do not eliminate the holistic pressures students in this study experience (Table 3).

Another challenge consistently highlighted was the lack of clarity and comprehensibility in self-learning modules, with all respondents reporting difficulty in understanding the language and instructions provided. This aligns with the findings of Tanucan et al. (2023), who, through a meta-synthesis, concluded that weak structural presence and vague instructions in printed modular distance learning hinder comprehension. Mercado (2024) further demonstrated that students’ perceptions of SLMs directly influence their academic performance, noting that although students value feedback and communication in modular systems, gaps in self-directed learning skills often lead to reduced effectiveness. The participants’ confusion and frustration when using unclear modules reveal how instructional design impacts not only understanding but also motivation. As phenomenological studies suggest, confusion in learning materials creates emotional fatigue and weakens confidence. Improving SLMs should therefore involve more than revising content; it should include clearer guidance and feedback that support learners emotionally and intellectually. Taken together, these findings suggest that the modules themselves are not inherently deficient, but their success depends on clear design, supportive scaffolding, and learner readiness.

Despite these obstacles, the respondents demonstrated remarkable motivation and resilience, with all participants expressing their determination to continue their studies regardless of hardship. This pattern resonates with Sun and Liu (2023), who found that academic resilience is positively associated with educational attainment, with student engagement serving as a critical mediator. The learners’ commitment to pursue education even under financial and instructional constraints illustrates how resilience sustains persistence. Nevertheless, Sun and Liu’s model emphasizes that resilience alone is insufficient; it must be supported by environments that foster engagement and reduce stressors. This aligns with the findings of Nasr et al. (2024), which warn that financial distress can erode well-being, making resilience harder to sustain without institutional support. The



findings suggest that resilience in this context is relational rather than individual. Learners draw strength from supportive teachers, peers, and family members, showing that motivation is nurtured through social connections. Creating spaces for collaboration and encouragement can therefore help transform resilience from mere endurance into meaningful engagement.

Table 3 Matrix of Thematic Analysis for Learners.

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Frequency	Representative Script (Caught Statement)
Challenges and Hindrances	Financial Struggles	Learners struggle to balance work and education due to financial constraints.	11/15	"Life is difficult, Sir. I'm helping my parents financially while also pursuing my studies."
	Logistical Issues	Difficulty with transportation costs and long travel distances to school.	2/15	"Transportation costs are high, and my home is far from school."
	Personal Responsibilities	Balancing caregiving duties or family obligations with academic work.	2/15	"I have to take care of family members, which affects my studies."
	Clarity and Comprehensibility of SLMs	Difficulty in understanding the instructions or content in self-learning modules due to unclear language or lack of detailed explanations.	15/15	"The instructions and content in the modules are not clear enough," "I don't always understand what I'm supposed to do."
Strengths and Benefits	Flexibility	Program allows learners to balance education with work or personal responsibilities.	15/15	"I will continue my studies no matter what, even walking long distances."
	Motivation and Resilience	Learners exhibit determination to pursue education despite challenges.	15/15	"I will study no matter what happens until I achieve my dreams in life."
Areas for Improvement	Financial Assistance	Learners request financial aid to alleviate economic challenges.	15/15	"I hope there would be financial support for those of us who struggle economically."
	Improved Learning Materials	Need for clearer and accessible learning resources tailored to their abilities.	15/15	"The modules should be clearer and suitable for our abilities."

Finally, the learners identified financial assistance and improved learning materials as priority areas for intervention. These recommendations are consistent with both local and international research. On one hand, Squibb (2023) confirmed that OER programs are a practical step in lowering educational costs, making learning more accessible. On the other hand, Tanucan et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of quality assurance mechanisms in modular learning, while Mercado (2024) showed that students' perceptions of SLMs improve when modules are responsive to their needs and supplemented with effective feedback systems. Learners' suggestions demonstrate awareness of how their challenges could be addressed through targeted support. Their voices reflect the importance of participatory reform, where students' lived realities guide institutional improvement. Taken together, these findings underscore that both financial and instructional reforms are feasible, evidence-based, and responsive to the actual needs of learners.

The results present a paradox: while learners exhibit resilience and motivation that allow them to continue despite barriers, structural inequities such as financial strain and unclear modules threaten their success. This shows that individual determination alone cannot overcome systemic gaps. Programs like the OHSP need to combine student-centered interventions with institutional responsibility to ensure that learners are not left to manage adversity on their own (Sarid et al., 2025; Taguba, 2023). Recent studies confirm the importance of addressing these issues not only through learner-centered interventions like resilience training, but also through systemic reforms in instructional design and financial support. Bridging the gap between student determination and institutional responsibility is therefore essential for improving learning outcomes in similar contexts.

The results of Table 4 reveal that teachers unanimously reported major challenges in carrying out their responsibilities. A central issue is the lack of incentives, as all teachers indicated that they often use personal funds for monitoring learners and fulfilling program-related tasks. This finding resonates with RAND Corporation (2024), which reported that larger pay increases and better benefits are directly tied to improved teacher retention, underscoring the importance of financial recognition. Similarly, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2023) emphasized that while more districts are beginning to implement strategic pay systems to address critical needs, such efforts are not always sufficient to reflect the actual workload of teachers. This concern reflects a deeper issue of how teachers' contributions in alternative programs are undervalued. Their testimonies reveal emotional exhaustion and frustration that stem not from lack of commitment but from limited institutional support. Teachers continue to fulfill their duties because of moral obligation, but the lack of recognition weakens long-term motivation.



These perspectives confirm that teachers’ call for adequate compensation and allowances is supported by broader evidence showing that financial burdens negatively affect motivation and retention.

Table 4 Matrix of Thematic Analysis for Teachers.

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Frequency	Representative Script (Caught Statement)
Challenges and Hindrances	Lack of Incentives	Teachers face financial burdens due to lack of compensation for additional responsibilities.	15/15	<i>“We use personal funds for monitoring learners, which is financially burdensome.”</i>
	Insufficient Training	Lack of mentoring and counseling training affects teachers' ability to support learners.	15/15	<i>“Training on mentoring and counseling is needed to support learners better.”</i>
	Limited Resources	Inadequate or unsuitable learning materials hinder effective teaching.	15/15	<i>“The modules provided are not always suitable for learners' abilities.”</i>
Strengths and Benefits	Learner Progress	Teachers find satisfaction in witnessing students overcome challenges and succeed.	15/15	<i>“Despite their situations, learners complete their requirements successfully.”</i>
	Inclusive Education	Teachers commend OHSP for enabling marginalized learners to continue education.	15/15	<i>“The program allows students to pursue education despite difficult life situations.”</i>
Areas for Improvement	Financial and Institutional Support	Teachers recommend better compensation, transportation allowances, and additional resources.	15/15	<i>“Provide sufficient incentives for teachers, especially for gasoline used in monitoring learners.”</i>
	Specialized Training	Teachers request training in mentoring, counseling, and learner engagement.	15/15	<i>“Conduct training or seminars for teachers teaching in OHSP on mentoring and counseling programs.”</i>
	Enhanced Learning Environment	Additional classrooms and separation from regular classes for OHSP students.	15/15	<i>“There should be dedicated classrooms for OHSP to provide a more focused learning environment.”</i>

Another recurring challenge identified was the lack of specialized training, particularly in mentoring and counseling, which teachers considered essential for effectively supporting learners. This aligns with Geletu et al. (2024), who demonstrated that pedagogical mentoring and coaching enhance teacher professional development and contribute to stronger learner engagement. Larsen (2023) further advanced the argument that mentoring frameworks should be re-imagined to become responsive and sustainable, ensuring that training is continuous and adapted to the needs of teachers. The experiences of the teachers show that they are willing to learn and adapt, yet they are hindered by the absence of structured training. This affects their confidence and effectiveness in handling the unique needs of OHSP learners. Continuous mentoring programs could empower teachers to better manage both the academic and emotional aspects of their students’ growth. These findings reinforce that the demand for mentoring and counseling training is not only valid but also critical for strengthening teacher capacity in programs that cater to marginalized learners.

Resource limitations were also highlighted, with teachers noting that available modules were not always suited to the abilities of their learners. This issue reflects a broader pattern in education systems where insufficiently adapted materials hinder instructional effectiveness and require teachers to make individual adjustments. Teachers’ actions to modify lessons on their own reflect creativity and commitment, yet they also point to systemic gaps. Their adaptations should not be seen as compensating for institutional failure but as evidence that educators are actively maintaining program integrity despite limited resources. Although the reviewed literature does not focus directly on resource adequacy, both RAND Corporation (2024) and the National Council on Teacher Quality (2023) indirectly point to the systemic nature of such constraints, noting that without institutional investment, teachers continue to shoulder disproportionate responsibilities.

Despite these hindrances, teachers expressed satisfaction in witnessing learner progress and acknowledged the inclusivity of the program in providing marginalized students with access to education. These accounts illustrate the intrinsic motivation teachers derive from their work, yet the literature warns that such motivation cannot fully counterbalance systemic gaps. As RAND Corporation (2024) stressed, retention and satisfaction are sustained not only by commitment but also by tangible supports such as fair compensation and improved working conditions. The emotional reward teachers experience from seeing their students succeed gives meaning to their work, but fulfillment cannot replace fair treatment. To sustain their motivation, schools must match teachers’ passion with equitable compensation and professional support.

Finally, the areas for improvement raised by teachers—better financial and institutional support, specialized training, and enhanced learning environments—are consistent with the reviewed literature. The evidence suggests that reforms in these areas are both necessary and achievable. The teachers’ insights clearly point toward systemic reform. Their recommendations



emphasize that lasting improvement in alternative programs will depend on institutional willingness to invest in people, not just materials. Financial and institutional support resonates with RAND’s (2024) and NCTQ’s (2023) calls for strategic compensation; specialized training aligns with the mentoring and coaching frameworks advocated by Geletu et al. (2024) and Larsen (2023); and improved learning environments point to the institutional responsibility to create conditions where both teachers and learners can thrive.

The Intervention Framework developed for the Open High School Program (OHSP) directly responds to the study’s findings (Figure 2) that learners struggled with financial constraints, transportation challenges, and difficulties comprehending self-learning modules, while teachers faced insufficient training, lack of incentives, and limited institutional support. Each component of the framework emerged from the themes identified in the data. The need for financial assistance came from both learners’ calls for help and teachers’ concerns about spending their own money. The inclusion of capacity-building programs reflected teachers’ desire for mentoring and counseling skills, while the redesign of learning materials was based on the learners’ difficulty in understanding SLMs. These elements are consistent with previous research showing that systemic supports improve motivation and learning outcomes (Geletu et al., 2024; Tanucan et al., 2023; Nasr et al., 2024). By prioritizing inputs such as learners, teachers, and resources, the framework aligns with recent research showing that weak instructional scaffolding is a key cause of disengagement in flexible programs (Chansaengsee & Suksakulchai, 2023). The processes of capacity building and mentoring respond to teachers’ call for professional development and are supported by recent evidence that pedagogical mentoring enhances teacher practice and student engagement (Geletu, 2023; Wikman et al., 2025). Likewise, the inclusion of specialized training for mentors reflects new measurement tools that validate mentoring competence as a cornerstone of teacher development (Tickell & Klassen, 2024). On the learner side, the redesign of SLMs directly addresses the unanimous feedback on clarity issues and is consistent with the findings of Tanucan et al. (2023), who concluded that modular distance learning requires quality assurance mechanisms and clearer alignment with competencies. The framework represents how lived experiences can directly inform policy and practice. Each proposed improvement was shaped by participants’ voices and supported by evidence, ensuring that the model is both realistic and grounded in context. Addressing financial support through stipends for students and differentiated pay for teachers also resonates with recent policy reports demonstrating that financial stress undermines academic performance (Nasr et al., 2024) and that strategic pay systems improve teacher recruitment and retention (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2024; Evans et al., 2023).

INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK

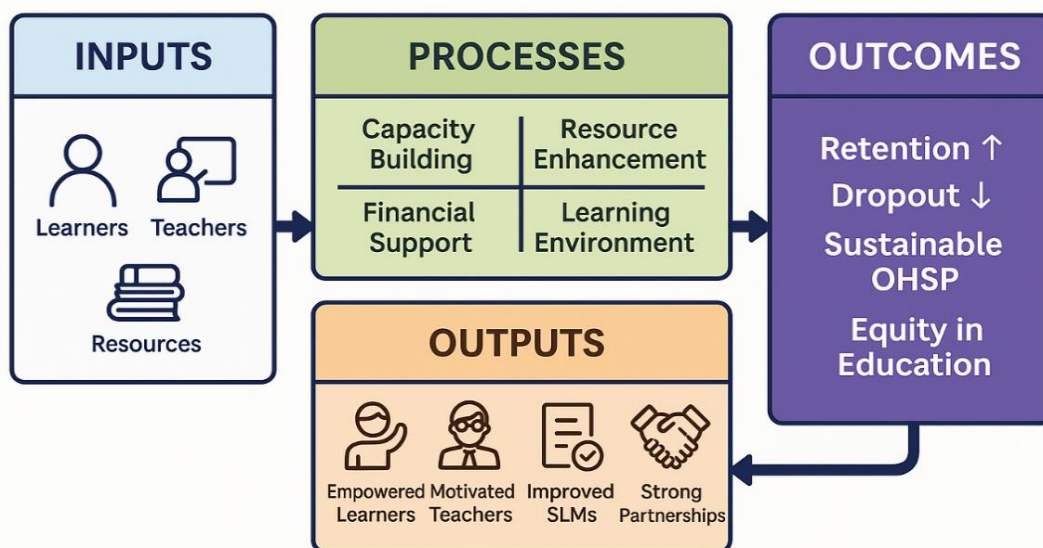


Figure 2 Intervention Framework.

As these processes are implemented, the framework generates outputs such as empowered learners, motivated teachers, improved SLMs, and strengthened community partnerships. These outputs are supported by studies demonstrating that resilience and social well-being contribute positively to academic outcomes when institutions provide strong support (Shao et al., 2025; Siebecke et al., 2024). In essence, the framework highlights that technical solutions work best when matched with social and institutional support. Training, material improvement, and incentives must operate together to create sustainable change in the OHSP. Improved SLM design enhances comprehension and student achievement (Tanucan et al., 2023), while teacher coaching and mentoring improve classroom climate and engagement (Wikman et al., 2025). Moreover, enhancing the



learning environment through dedicated OHSP classrooms and transport solutions responds to local challenges of long commutes, with research confirming that school transportation access is directly linked to improved attendance (Lenhoff et al., 2023; “Another one rides the bus,” 2023). At the outcome level, the framework ensures higher retention and reduced dropout by bridging the gap between student resilience and systemic reforms. This is reinforced by large-scale evidence that engagement often declines during the transition to secondary school unless systemic supports are provided (ImpactEd Group, 2025; UCL Institute of Education, 2025; Winthrop et al., 2025). The final framework is both practical and grounded in human experience. It transforms the participants’ struggles and insights into concrete action points that can improve retention, motivation, and educational access in regional contexts. By embedding financial, institutional, and pedagogical reforms, the framework positions OHSP as a sustainable model aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities), enabling equity-driven transformation in alternative education.

3.3. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of learners and teachers in the Sta. Fe–San Jose Open High School Program (OHSP), several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted within a single district, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different socio-cultural or institutional conditions. Second, the use of phenomenological methods, while effective for capturing in-depth narratives, relies heavily on participants’ self-reports, which may be influenced by recall bias or personal subjectivity. Third, the sample size, though adequate for qualitative inquiry, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among all learners and teachers in the OHSP nationwide. Finally, the study focused primarily on learner and teacher perspectives and did not include insights from administrators, policymakers, or parents, which could have provided a more holistic understanding of program implementation.

4. Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of learners and teachers in the Junior High Open High School Program (OHSP) in the District of Sta. Fe-San Jose, uncovering challenges, strengths, and areas for improvement. The findings revealed that learners face significant barriers, such as financial constraints, logistical difficulties, and personal responsibilities, while teachers grapple with inadequate resources, insufficient training, and lack of institutional support. Despite these challenges, both learners and teachers exhibit resilience and determination, highlighting the program's strengths in providing flexible and inclusive educational opportunities. Learners value the OHSP for enabling them to balance education with personal responsibilities, while teachers find fulfillment in witnessing students succeed against the odds. These insights underscore the critical need to address systemic barriers, such as improving financial support, enhancing teacher training, and providing tailored learning materials to maximize the program's impact.

Aligned with the study’s objectives, the results highlight key areas for intervention to strengthen the OHSP. Addressing the challenges faced by both learners and teachers requires targeted financial assistance, improved learning environments, and specialized training for educators in mentoring and counseling. Furthermore, the program’s flexibility and inclusivity emphasize the potential of alternative education models to cater to diverse learners, particularly those from marginalized communities. This study concludes that while the OHSP has made significant strides in addressing educational gaps, its full potential can only be realized through sustained efforts to enhance institutional support, foster teacher development, and provide learners with equitable resources. These steps are essential to ensuring the program continues to empower learners and educators alike, contributing to broader educational equity and societal development.

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Ethical considerations

This study strictly adhered to established ethical protocols to safeguard participants’ rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, with respondents fully briefed on the objectives, scope, and procedures of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were given the option to withdraw at any stage without adverse consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of coded identifiers and secure data storage accessible only to the research team. Data were analyzed in aggregate form, with no identifying information disclosed, thereby ensuring the privacy of all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this manuscript. Ethical principles, including those concerning plagiarism, informed consent, research misconduct, data fabrication and falsification, duplicate publication or submission, and redundancy, were fully observed throughout the conduct and reporting of this study.

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