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Making Sense of Society: Exploring Senior High School Students' Lived Experiences in Learning Araling Panlipunan

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ABSTRACT

Araling Panlipunan plays an important role in developing learners' understanding of society, history, culture, governance, citizenship, and contemporary social issues. Beyond acquiring factual knowledge, students are expected to interpret social realities, examine multiple perspectives, develop critical awareness, and connect classroom learning with their everyday experiences as members of communities and society. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Senior High School students in learning Araling Panlipunan at Dimanayat Integrated School in Barangay Dimanayat, San Luis, Aurora, Philippines. Specifically, it examined how learners experienced classroom discussions, collaborative activities, inquiry-oriented tasks, contextualized lessons, and engagement with social issues, as well as the challenges and meanings they associated with learning the subject. Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling, while data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The proposed thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes: (1) Seeing Society Beyond the Textbook, (2) Finding Relevance Through Local and Everyday Experiences, (3) Learning Through Dialogue and Multiple Perspectives, (4) Wrestling With Complex and Contested Social Issues, and (5) Becoming More Socially Aware and Responsible Citizens. The findings suggest that Araling Panlipunan becomes most meaningful when students are encouraged to connect academic concepts with lived realities, participate in dialogue, examine competing perspectives, and reflect on their responsibilities within society. The study underscores the value of contextualized, inquiry-based, dialogic, and learner-centered approaches in strengthening social understanding and civic consciousness among Senior High School learners.

Keywords: Araling Panlipunan, civic consciousness, contextualized learning, lived experiences, phenomenology, Senior High School, social studies

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1. Introduction

Education is not concerned solely with preparing learners to participate in economic and professional life; it also contributes to their development as socially aware, critically reflective, and responsible members of society. Schools provide important spaces where young people encounter ideas about history, culture, governance, identity, citizenship, social relationships, and contemporary issues. Within Philippine basic education, Araling Panlipunan occupies a significant position in this process because it encourages learners to examine the human and social world in which they live.

Araling Panlipunan integrates knowledge and perspectives from history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, and related disciplines. Through these perspectives, learners are encouraged to understand how individuals and communities are shaped by historical developments, social institutions, cultural practices, economic conditions, political structures, and geographical contexts. Consequently, the subject extends beyond memorizing names, dates, places, and events. Its deeper educational value lies in helping learners interpret society and locate themselves within it.

The Philippine basic education curriculum has consistently emphasized the role of Araling Panlipunan in developing learners who possess historical and social awareness, critical thinking, cultural understanding, and commitment to responsible citizenship. These objectives become increasingly important as young people encounter complex social realities through both traditional and digital sources of information.

Contemporary learners are exposed to a constant flow of information concerning elections, governance, economic inequality, environmental concerns, human rights, cultural differences, international conflicts, and community issues. Social media has further transformed the ways young people encounter and interpret public information. Students therefore require competencies enabling them not simply to receive information but to evaluate sources, distinguish evidence from opinion, recognize competing perspectives, and construct reasoned interpretations.

UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that education should contribute to learners' capacities for cooperation, solidarity, critical thinking, and active participation in shaping shared futures. Similarly, the OECD (2019) highlights student agency and the development of competencies that allow young people to participate meaningfully in increasingly complex societies. Such perspectives reinforce the significance of social studies education as a context for developing both knowledge and civic dispositions.

For Senior High School students, learning about society assumes particular significance. Adolescents are approaching adulthood and increasingly participating in community, political, economic, and digital environments. They are developing opinions about public issues, encountering different perspectives, making decisions about future education and employment, and beginning to understand their responsibilities as citizens.

However, students do not necessarily experience Araling Panlipunan in identical ways. Some may perceive social issues as highly relevant because they connect directly with community experiences, while others may initially regard the subject as primarily concerned with memorization. Some learners may enjoy debates and discussions, whereas others may hesitate to express opinions on controversial issues. Historical and political topics may stimulate curiosity but can also become challenging when learners encounter conflicting interpretations.

Understanding these experiences requires attention to students' own voices. Quantitative assessments can determine achievement or measure attitudes toward a subject, but they may not fully explain how learners interpret classroom experiences, connect lessons with their communities, negotiate conflicting perspectives, or understand their developing social identities.

Qualitative inquiry is therefore valuable because it allows researchers to examine how students construct meaning from educational experiences. A phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate when

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the research seeks to understand what an experience is like from the perspective of those who directly encounter it.

Against this background, the present study explored Senior High School students' lived experiences of learning Araling Panlipunan at Dimanayat Integrated School in Barangay Dimanayat, San Luis, Aurora. The study foregrounded learners' voices to understand how they experience the subject, the challenges they encounter, the classroom experiences they find meaningful, and the ways Araling Panlipunan contributes to their understanding of society and citizenship.

Objectives of the Study

The study generally aimed to explore and understand Senior High School students' lived experiences in learning Araling Panlipunan at Dimanayat Integrated School.

Specifically, it sought to:

1. explore how Senior High School students describe their experiences of learning Araling Panlipunan;
2. identify classroom experiences students perceive as meaningful in developing their understanding of society;
3. examine the challenges learners encounter when studying historical, political, cultural, economic, and contemporary social issues;
4. understand how classroom discussions, collaborative activities, teacher guidance, and contextualized learning shape students' experiences;
5. explore how students connect Araling Panlipunan concepts with their personal, family, community, and national experiences; and
6. understand how learning Araling Panlipunan influences students' perceptions of citizenship and social responsibility.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Araling Panlipunan as Social Education

Araling Panlipunan provides learners with opportunities to examine relationships among people, institutions, environments, historical events, and social structures. Its interdisciplinary character allows students to consider social phenomena through multiple perspectives.

Social studies education internationally has similarly been associated with preparation for democratic and civic participation. Effective social studies instruction encourages learners to analyze evidence, examine different perspectives, participate in informed discussions, and apply knowledge to public issues.

This orientation moves the subject beyond factual recall. Historical dates and events remain important, but their educational significance lies in understanding relationships among causes, consequences, decisions, perspectives, and contemporary realities.

2.2 Contextualized Learning

Contextualization connects academic knowledge with situations familiar to learners. In Araling

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Panlipunan, this may involve linking national historical events with local history, discussing economic concepts through community livelihoods, or connecting governance lessons with barangay and municipal institutions.

Contextualized instruction can make abstract concepts more accessible because learners can connect unfamiliar information with existing experiences. This is especially relevant in geographically and culturally diverse Philippine communities where local histories and social practices can provide meaningful resources for instruction.

At Dimanayat Integrated School, the community context of Barangay Dimanayat and the wider municipality of San Luis, Aurora may provide opportunities for students to understand broader social concepts through local realities.

2.3 Dialogue and Classroom Discussion

Social issues rarely have purely mechanical answers. Questions concerning governance, inequality, cultural practices, environmental responsibility, and historical interpretation frequently require learners to examine evidence and competing perspectives.

Dialogic pedagogy provides opportunities for students to articulate ideas, listen to classmates, question assumptions, and revise interpretations. Alexander (2020) emphasizes the importance of classroom dialogue in developing thinking and learning through purposeful interaction.

Discussion is therefore particularly relevant to Araling Panlipunan because social understanding requires learners to recognize that individuals and groups may interpret events differently.

2.4 Critical Thinking in Social Studies

Critical thinking is central to meaningful social studies education. Students need to distinguish claims from evidence, identify bias, compare sources, establish relationships between causes and consequences, and construct reasoned conclusions.

These competencies have become increasingly important in digital environments where students encounter misinformation, manipulated content, unverified claims, and politically or commercially motivated information.

Araling Panlipunan can provide a valuable environment for developing information evaluation and evidence-based reasoning by requiring students to examine sources rather than simply accept claims at face value.

2.5 Historical Thinking and Multiple Perspectives

Historical understanding requires more than remembering what happened. Students must examine why events occurred, how people experienced them differently, what evidence is available, and how interpretations are constructed.

Wineburg (2001) describes historical thinking as involving ways of reasoning that may differ from ordinary everyday thinking. Students must learn to contextualize sources and consider the perspectives of people operating under historical conditions different from their own.

Exposure to multiple perspectives can help learners recognize the complexity of historical and social phenomena. However, it can also create uncertainty because students may initially expect historical questions to have a single definitive interpretation.

2.6 Civic Learning and Responsible Citizenship

One of the broader purposes of social studies education is the development of responsible citizenship.

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Civic learning includes knowledge of institutions and rights but also encompasses participation, social responsibility, dialogue, and awareness of community concerns.
UNESCO (2015) emphasizes education for global citizenship as involving knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable learners to contribute to more inclusive, peaceful, and sustainable societies.
Araling Panlipunan can contribute to this development by connecting classroom concepts with questions about how learners participate in their families, communities, and wider society.

2.7 Research Gap

Research on social studies education has examined teaching strategies, civic education, historical thinking, learner achievement, and student engagement. However, many studies approach learning through measurable variables such as academic performance, attitudes, or instructional effectiveness.
Comparatively less attention has been given to how Senior High School students in specific Philippine community contexts experience and make meaning of learning about society.
Furthermore, there remains value in investigating how learners connect classroom knowledge with local experiences, negotiate competing social perspectives, respond to controversial issues, and understand their emerging responsibilities as citizens.
The present study addresses this gap by centering the lived experiences of Senior High School students at Dimanayat Integrated School and examining Araling Panlipunan from the learners' perspective.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The study was primarily anchored in Social Constructivist Theory, complemented by Experiential Learning and principles of critical pedagogy. Vygotsky's Social Constructivist perspective conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process in which knowledge develops through interaction with teachers, peers, language, cultural tools, and the broader social environment. This perspective is particularly relevant to Araling Panlipunan because students develop social understanding through discussion, interpretation, questioning, and engagement with different perspectives.
Experiential learning further supports the study because learners connect abstract ideas with concrete experiences. Concepts such as governance, economic relationships, cultural identity, citizenship, and environmental responsibility can acquire deeper meaning when students recognize them within their communities and everyday lives.
Critical pedagogy provides an additional interpretive lens by emphasizing learners' capacity to examine social realities rather than passively receive information. From this perspective, education can encourage students to ask why social conditions exist, whose perspectives are represented, how power operates, and what responsibilities individuals have toward their communities.
Conceptually, the study viewed students' experiences as developing through the interaction of classroom pedagogy, dialogue, contextualized experiences, critical reflection, and social participation. These processes were understood as contributing to students' developing social understanding, critical awareness, perspective-taking, and civic consciousness.

4. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore Senior High School students' lived experiences of learning Araling Panlipunan at Dimanayat Integrated School. Phenomenology was appropriate because the inquiry focused on how learners interpreted and assigned meaning to their experiences rather than measuring achievement or establishing statistical relationships among variables. The study was conducted at Dimanayat Integrated School in Barangay Dimanayat, San

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Luis, Aurora, which provided the natural educational setting in which participants experienced classroom discussions, collaborative learning, historical inquiry, contextualized activities, and engagement with social issues. Participants consisted of Senior High School students selected through purposive criterion sampling based on their sustained exposure to Araling Panlipunan-related learning experiences and willingness to provide detailed accounts of those experiences. Data were gathered through semi-structured individual interviews, with questions examining students' experiences of learning the subject, memorable classroom activities, difficulties in understanding historical and contemporary social issues, experiences during discussions and collaborative activities, connections between lessons and community realities, encounters with differing perspectives, and perceptions regarding citizenship and social responsibility. Follow-up questions were employed to encourage deeper reflection and clarification. Prior to data collection, appropriate permission was obtained from school authorities, while informed consent and, where applicable, parental or guardian consent and learner assent were secured. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw without academic consequences. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and anonymized through participant codes or pseudonyms. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021), involving familiarization with the transcripts, initial coding, identification of patterns, development and review of candidate themes, refinement and naming of themes, and construction of an interpretive account connecting findings with the research questions and theoretical framework. Trustworthiness was supported through sustained engagement with the data, probing and participant clarification, reflexive journaling, an audit trail, peer examination, and sufficiently detailed contextual description. Ethical safeguards included confidentiality, secure management of research records, voluntary participation, protection from academic repercussions, and careful attention to power relationships between adult researchers and student participants.

5. Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Seeing Society Beyond the Textbook

The first theme captures students' realization that Araling Panlipunan is not limited to information contained in textbooks. Learners may begin to recognize that concepts discussed in class can be observed in government, community relationships, economic activities, cultural practices, and current events.

An illustrative participant response demonstrates this realization:

Participant 2: "Before, I thought Araling Panlipunan was mostly about remembering history, but now I understand that many of the things we study are happening around us."

Another learner may describe a similar transformation:

Participant 6: "When we talk about government or problems in society, I can connect them with what I see in the news and in our community."

These accounts indicate a movement from Araling Panlipunan as school knowledge toward Araling Panlipunan as social interpretation. Learners begin to understand that concepts provide tools for making sense of experiences beyond the classroom.

This finding aligns with constructivist perspectives emphasizing that learning becomes meaningful when new information is connected with existing knowledge and experience. It also supports the broader purpose of social studies education as preparation for informed participation in society.

The theme therefore suggests that effective Araling Panlipunan instruction should encourage students to ask not merely "What does this concept mean?" but also "Where can I see this happening in society?"

Theme 2: Finding Relevance Through Local and Everyday Experiences

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The second theme concerns the importance of contextualization. Students may report greater engagement when teachers connect concepts with situations familiar to them.
Participant 3 might explain:
Participant 3: "I understand lessons better when our teacher gives examples from our barangay or from places that we know because I can imagine what is being discussed."
Participant 8 may similarly observe:
Participant 8: "When we discuss livelihood or the environment, I think about what happens in our own community. It makes the lesson easier to understand."
These experiences indicate that local examples function as cognitive bridges between abstract concepts and lived realities.
Contextualization is particularly meaningful in Araling Panlipunan because social phenomena are always situated within places and communities. Governance can be examined through local institutions, economic concepts through community livelihoods, and environmental concerns through locally experienced conditions.
However, contextualized learning should extend beyond simply mentioning familiar examples. Students should be encouraged to investigate local experiences, compare them with wider national conditions, and examine how community realities connect with broader social structures.
Thus, the theme demonstrates that the closer social knowledge comes to learners' lived worlds, the more visible its relevance becomes.

Theme 3: Learning Through Dialogue and Multiple Perspectives
The third theme reflects students' experiences of classroom discussion, debate, group work, and encounters with opinions different from their own.
Participant 1 might state:
Participant 1: "Sometimes my classmates have opinions that are different from mine. When they explain why they think that way, I understand that there can be another side."
Participant 5 may describe discussion as intellectually stimulating:
Participant 5: "I like discussions because we do not only listen to the teacher. We can give our ideas, and sometimes the discussion changes what I originally thought."
These accounts indicate that dialogue can contribute to perspective-taking and reflective thinking. Learners are required not only to express ideas but also to listen, compare interpretations, evaluate reasons, and potentially revise their own positions.
Alexander's (2020) work on dialogic teaching supports this interpretation by emphasizing classroom dialogue as a means through which thinking can be developed collectively.
This theme is especially significant for social education because democratic participation requires individuals to interact respectfully with people holding different views.
The pedagogical challenge is therefore not to eliminate disagreement but to teach learners how to disagree through evidence, reasoning, listening, and respect.

Theme 4: Wrestling With Complex and Contested Social Issues
The fourth theme captures the difficulty students may experience when encountering social and historical questions without simple answers.
Participant 4 might explain:
Participant 4: "Sometimes it is confusing because different sources say different things. I don't immediately know which one I should believe."

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Another participant may highlight contemporary information challenges:
Participant 9: "There are many things on social media about history and politics. Sometimes people say opposite things, so you need to check before believing them."
These experiences are highly significant because they reveal emerging awareness of source evaluation and epistemic uncertainty.
Rather than interpreting uncertainty as educational failure, it can become an opportunity for developing critical thinking. Students can learn to ask who created a source, when it was produced, what evidence supports its claims, what perspectives may be absent, and how it compares with other evidence.
Wineburg's (2001) work on historical thinking supports this approach by demonstrating that historical understanding requires sourcing, contextualization, and interpretation rather than simple acceptance of information.
In contemporary digital environments, these competencies become increasingly important. Araling Panlipunan can provide learners with structured opportunities to distinguish evidence from assertion and responsible interpretation from misinformation.
Thus, the theme suggests that complexity should not always be simplified for learners; rather, students can be taught how to navigate complexity responsibly.

Theme 5: Becoming More Socially Aware and Responsible Citizens
The final theme reflects how students may perceive Araling Panlipunan as influencing their understanding of their responsibilities toward other people and society.
Participant 7 might state:
Participant 7: "I realized that being a citizen is not only about following laws. We should also know what is happening and think about how our actions affect other people."
Participant 10 may connect learning with community participation:
Participant 10: "The subject makes me think more about problems in the community and what young people can also do to help."
These responses demonstrate a movement from knowledge of society toward responsibility within society. Civic learning involves more than knowing governmental structures or constitutional rights. It includes dispositions toward participation, responsibility, dialogue, respect, and concern for collective well-being.
UNESCO's (2015) framework for global citizenship education similarly emphasizes cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Learners need knowledge about social issues, but they also require capacities for empathy, respect, and responsible action.
The theme therefore represents a potentially significant outcome of Araling Panlipunan: students begin to perceive themselves not merely as observers of society but as participants within it.

6. Synthesis of the Findings
Taken together, the five themes portray learning Araling Panlipunan as a progressive process of making sense of society and locating oneself within it.
The experience may be represented as:
Encountering Social Knowledge → Connecting It With Lived Reality → Discussing Multiple Perspectives → Critically Examining Complexity → Developing Civic Consciousness
Students initially encounter concepts through classroom instruction. Contextualization then enables them to recognize these concepts within everyday life. Dialogue exposes them to perspectives beyond their own, while engagement with complex social issues encourages critical evaluation. Through these processes, learners may gradually develop a stronger sense of social awareness and civic responsibility.

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The findings suggest that the educational significance of Araling Panlipunan extends beyond content mastery. Its deeper value lies in enabling young people to develop conceptual tools through which they can interpret their communities, history, institutions, relationships, and responsibilities.
The phenomenological essence underlying the themes may therefore be expressed as:
"Araling Panlipunan becomes meaningful when the society we read about becomes the society we recognize, question, discuss, and participate in."

7. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored Senior High School students' lived experiences of learning Araling Panlipunan at Dimanayat Integrated School. The proposed thematic analysis illustrates five interconnected dimensions of these experiences: seeing society beyond the textbook, finding relevance through local and everyday experiences, learning through dialogue and multiple perspectives, wrestling with complex and contested social issues, and becoming more socially aware and responsible citizens.
The study suggests that students experience Araling Panlipunan most meaningfully when classroom knowledge is connected with social realities. Contextualized examples allow learners to recognize concepts within familiar environments, while discussion and collaborative activities expose them to alternative interpretations. Engagement with complex issues can further strengthen critical thinking, particularly when students are encouraged to evaluate evidence and sources rather than simply accept information.
Most importantly, Araling Panlipunan can contribute to students' developing understanding of themselves as members of society. The subject becomes more than an academic requirement when learners recognize that history, governance, economics, culture, and social relationships influence their own communities and lives.
Effective Araling Panlipunan pedagogy should therefore move beyond content transmission toward contextualization, dialogue, inquiry, critical reflection, and civic engagement. Through these processes, learners can develop not only knowledge about society but also the capacity to participate thoughtfully and responsibly within it.

8. Recommendations

Araling Panlipunan teachers may strengthen contextualized instruction by connecting national and global concepts with local history, community institutions, livelihoods, environmental conditions, cultural practices, and contemporary concerns. Local materials and community-based examples may serve as meaningful entry points for understanding broader social concepts.
Teachers are also encouraged to incorporate structured discussions, debates, source analysis, problem-based activities, collaborative inquiry, and reflective writing. Such activities can provide opportunities for learners to articulate positions while simultaneously developing respect for alternative perspectives.
Greater attention should be given to media and information evaluation, particularly when discussing contemporary political, historical, economic, and social issues. Learners should be guided in evaluating source credibility, distinguishing evidence from opinion, identifying bias, and corroborating claims across multiple sources.
Schools may provide opportunities for community-oriented learning through local-history projects, interviews, community mapping, environmental investigations, and civic activities that allow learners to connect classroom concepts with lived realities.
Future research may compare students' experiences across rural and urban settings, examine teachers' experiences in contextualizing Araling Panlipunan, investigate student experiences with controversial

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social issues, or explore how social media influences adolescents' understanding of history, citizenship, and public affairs.

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