



Lived experiences of student mothers in one public secondary school

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of ten student mothers enrolled on modular distance learning in one public secondary school. The study revealed five themes focusing on the difficulties, coping mechanisms, and motivations of student mothers. The findings of the study drive a pervasive approach, strategies, and actions from the educational sector or educational leaders to redesign curricular or instructional framework, learning delivery modes, initiatives, and innovations that is inclusive, relevant, and responsive to the needs and situation of student mothers. Likewise, the study calls for the government agencies (Local Government Units, Barangay, women groups) unified actions towards empowering student mothers as productive citizens.

ARTICLE INFO

Received : Apr. 2, 2024

Revised : Dec. 6, 2024

Accepted : Dec. 30, 2024

KEYWORDS

Dual role, Lived experiences, Modular distance learning, Phenomenological inquiry, Student mothers

Suggested Citation (APA Style 7th Edition):

Lausa, S. M., Britania, E. V., & Bacomo, D. M. (2024). Lived experiences of student mothers in one public secondary school. *International Research Journal of Science, Technology, Education, and Management*, 4(4), 76-85. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14744633>

INTRODUCTION

The population of student mothers has been rising globally since 1966 (Williams et al., 2006; cited in Moghadam et al., 2017). In the U.S., for instance, 70% of the 4.3 million student parents enrolled in college for the school year 2019-2020 are mothers. This phenomenon raises concerns about their ability to balance dual roles, as motherhood often clashes with academic responsibilities (Dasig, 2020). As a full-time job, childrearing may be very strenuous for female students who get pregnant beyond their anticipation (Cabaguing, 2017). Despite these challenges, many student-mothers persevere to complete their education, as it is seen as a means to secure a better future (Andres, 2021; Dasig, 2020)

In the Philippines, the rise in student mothers is linked to the worsening teenage pregnancy problem. The University of the Philippines and the United Nations Population Fund (2020) revealed unintended pregnancies increased by 42%. One out of these ten women was still in their teens, a time for high school studies (Mendoza, 2021). These findings are remarkably true to the researchers' experience wherein more students getting pregnant have exhibited significant prevalence in schools.

Globally, many studies were done about student mothers. Some also focused on their experiences (Simon, 2020) and specific aspects like support (Corfe, 2019) and challenges and coping strategies (Anibijuwon & Esimai, 2020). However, most are in the context of tertiary education and physical classes, wherein student mothers are presumed to have more difficulty balancing two roles and faced with more challenges.

This study therefore aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences of student mothers in public high schools under modular distance learning. The findings highlight the need for teachers to assess the suitability of this new learning approach for student mothers, potentially leading to adjustments in instructional delivery that better meet their needs.

In conclusion, this investigation is significant in providing insights into how educational systems can better support student mothers, especially in light of the increasing prevalence of teenage pregnancies and the transition to distance learning.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This phenomenological study has explored the experiences in childrearing while studying of the student mothers enrolled in a public National High School. This research inquiry has answered these specific questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of student mothers?
2. What intervention may be provided based on their experiences?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used qualitative research employing phenomenological approach to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of the student mothers in a public secondary school. Participants of the study consisted of ten student mothers enrolled in one public secondary high school in Negros Occidental, Philippines. In selecting the participants, the researchers used purposive sampling, which is a non-probability type of sampling method. In the use of this sampling technique, the participants were purposively selected based on these criteria: (1) student enrolled in the locale of the study during the SY 2021-2022, (2) at least 18 years old, and (3) parenting as a mother while studying in modular distance learning.

The instrument used in this study is a researcher-made interview guide composed of 10 open-ended questions. This kind of research tool enables the researcher to engage in the organic "give and take" of dialogue and obtain rich, detailed information through probing and questioning strategies (Canos, 2017). The researcher-made

instrument was validated by nine (9) expert validators in the field of study, using the widely used appraisal of content validity by C. H. Lawshe (1975). Nine jurors perfectly agreed on all items as essential, thus all with a perfect CVR of 1.00. Therefore, all items were retained as they are valid.

To establish the reliability of coding, audiotaped interviews were listened to by an external auditor and prepared a coding of data from the interviews. Adhering to the inter-coder/inter-rater reliability cited in McHugh (2012) by Cohen (1960), known as Cohen’s kappa, the formula used was $k=(p_o-p_e)/(1-p_e)$, where p_o pertains to the relative observed agreement among raters and p_e to the hypothetical probability of chance agreement. The study found that the kappa value was 0.94118, or 94.118% agreement, or nearly perfect agreement. As a result, the investigation's findings showed outstanding reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The overall goal of the study was to provide a clear picture of the mothering experiences of student mothers enrolled in a public secondary school during the 2021–2022 school year while they were enrolled in modular distance learning. The primary textural themes identified in the interview transcripts are as follows.

Table 1. Student-Mothers’ Lived Experiences on Modular Distance Learning

| Themes | Core Ideas and Supporting Quotes |
|--|---|
| 1. Being a student mother is tough, but it offers new learnings and develops time management skills. | <p>Core Idea</p> <p>Balancing responsibilities as a mother and as a student is the main challenge of being one.</p> <p>Supporting Quotes</p> <p>“As a student mother, your childcare and household responsibilities limit what you can do and want to do. Only when my baby is asleep that I can clean the house and answer my modules.”</p> <p>“I realized in life that it is not easy to become a student mother. You are a student and a mother at the same time. Indeed, the struggle is real because you don't only think of yourself. The welfare of your child is your priority; I think of milk to feed him, food, who will take care of him when I go to school to get my modules because I am a single mother.”</p> <p>“I would say it’s challenging. But you can learn quite a lot, and it helps you know how to manage your time well.”</p> <p>“It’s interesting; when you get your modules, you bring with you your child. It is quite good, and it makes me happy to experience something new once again in my life.”</p> |
| 2. Unselfish family support helps student mothers cope with their dual roles. | <p>Core Idea</p> <p>Family support drives student mothers to pursue goals</p> <p>Supporting Quotes</p> |

“I was able to do it because of the love and support of my family. During this pandemic, we became closer, and they even encouraged me to overcome anything. They take care of my baby when I need time for myself and for answering my modules, school projects, and performances.”

“I have managed it with the inspiration of my family. Their support pushed me to continue schooling. My husband is willing to send me to school; he supports and inspires me in my studies.”

“When I started studying again, what I did was divide my time between schooling and taking care of my child. What I bear in mind is that I have to divide my time for their own sake and so that they could see that although I am already a mother, I still fulfill my duties as a student.”

“Since my child is my utmost priority, studying and answering my modules happen when I am done with taking care of my child. I do my modules at night since I have to do my household and mothering duties first.”

3. Modular distance learning is tailored for student mothers, but learning is sometimes impossible.

Core Idea

Modular distance learning has made the student-mothers’ dual roles easier.

Supporting Quotes

“Since we are under modular distance learning, we can just answer our modules at home after doing all the household chores and other obligations.”

“Modular learning is a big help since it allows us to study and answer modules at home while we take care of our child. Additionally, I was able to help my parents with household chores and have time with my baby.”

“There are modules I cannot understand well and which are better explained by teachers to aid understanding. Without teachers, it is really difficult, so what I do is research the questions online just to get some ideas.”

“Sometimes, there are questions I cannot answer because there is no one I can address my questions to. Sometimes, I can understand nothing unlike in face-to-face classes wherein there is a discussion of lesson that would help you understand, especially in math that needs solving.”

4. For student mothers, finishing senior high school will help them land a stable job

Core Idea

Finishing school will land student mothers stable and decent jobs in the future

Supporting Quotes

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>“I continue to study for the future of my children and my family. If I land a job in the future, that will lessen our problems, specifically in the financial aspect.”</p> <p>“Poverty is also one of the reasons why I continue studying. I want to improve our current situation, so I grabbed the opportunity to study now, so we could have a more quality life by finding a regularly-paying job.”</p> <p>“I decided to continue for myself. I want to prove to myself that I am capable of finishing my studies and reaching my dream to become a professional.”</p> |
| <p>5. Student mothers’ call for the continued implementation of modular distance learning as it works well with their situation.</p> | <p>Core Idea</p> <p>Modular distance learning allows student mothers reach life and academic goals</p> <p>Supporting Quotes</p> <p>“Hopefully, the school will continue to implement the modular distance learning for student mothers, so it won't be hard for us, and we can reach our dreams.”</p> <p>“I hope for the continued implementation of modular distance learning for us parent-students to help us reach our dreams.”</p> <p>“We should be given sufficient time to accomplish our modules. We also want the teachers’ patience and understanding of our situation.”</p> <p>“We are appealing for our teachers' understanding when we submit modules late because of our childrearing obligations.”</p> <p>“We hope that there are scholarships specifically available for us student mothers, so we could pursue college. An organization that will give us a voice in the community will also be helpful. Additionally, I hope job opportunities are available to help us have a better life one of these days.”</p> <p>“I hope there will be scholarships available for us student mothers. The barangay may provide us financial support or job and livelihood.”</p> <p>“We also ask for understanding towards student mothers, especially single parents. Stop passing us judgment because all we want is to have a normal life again.”</p> |

Table 1 shows five themes, core ideas, and the supporting quotes of the lived experiences of student mothers in modular distance learning. Study revealed that, being a student mother poses many struggles where balancing responsibilities as a mother and as a student is the main challenge. Student mothers have to deal with accomplishing school requirements while also keeping their homes clean and provided. With childcare and household responsibilities as their main priority, some lack focus in learning because they have to attend to the needs of their children and family, especially since the financial problem is a common experience for all. Though the student-mother situation is challenging, student mothers see it as beautiful, interesting, and fun. They get to enjoy new experiences in life and learn numerous things; especially most of them are just back in school again after many years.

They learn new lessons that are perceived to have college-level difficulty and those they did not learn back when they were in high school (junior high school now). They learn how to manage their time effectively, being posed with conflicting demands.

Study of Manalang (2015) found that student mothers are having a hard time managing their dual roles—being a student and at the same time being a parent (mother). In a similar study, Andres (2021) revealed that the fundamental predicament faced by student mothers is the competing yet equally pressing demands of being a mother and a student. Contrary to the current findings, however, Manalang (2015) revealed that one of the problems that the participants experienced was having a lack of time with their children, which is not a problem found in the current study since childcare is the topmost priority of the participants. Andres (2021) also found that financial constraint is one of the problems that confront student mothers. Before the accomplishment of school-related tasks, student mothers first find ways how to make ends meet, given the financial difficulty of the family. Despite their difficult situation, however, student mothers still managed to see the positive outcomes of their sacrifice (Manalang, 2015). As they shared in this study, they described this experience as fun and interesting, as they were immersed in new experiences and learnings that allowed them to pursue their dreams and career. Moreover, their time management skill is developed as they learned how to balance schooling and parenting (Dasig, 2020).

Student mothers can cope with the demands of their situation with the moral, financial, and childcare support of their families. They are well-supported by their husbands and parents in their decision to study again or continue. They are showered with words of encouragement, belief, and understanding, which keep them going in achieving their goals. Apart from providing motivation and moral support, their family also helps them look after their children when they need to finish or do school tasks and financially supports them with their school-related needs. With two roles to play at the same time, student mothers manage their time well. They also set their priorities straight to fulfill their responsibilities in both roles. With their children and family on top of the priority list, student mothers fulfill their childcare and household responsibilities for the day before accomplishing their modules or doing any school-related tasks. However, when a family member, particularly a youngster, becomes ill, coping seems impossible. Andres (2021) also finds that although the contemporary circumstances of student mothers are challenging, they are able to fulfil their roles as student mothers due to the support of their parents and spouses. Their primary source of encouragement and strength is the support network. They can balance their two tasks with the aid of effective time management. Finally, setting priorities is always done to prevent disputes and issues later (Andres, 2021).

Manalang (2015) simply called this the involvement of other people in the life of the student. The study found that the current situation of student mothers is hard, but because of the support that they get from their family, friends, classmates, and the father of the baby, they can still manage their dual roles – being student and parent. They were supported by different kinds of support, such as moral and financial support. Furthermore, according to Smith (2019), student mothers reported that a supportive family could help them manage multiple roles. Family members can help with child care as it allows student mothers to attend to school tasks.

Modular distance learning is suitable for the situation of student mothers. Through this learning delivery mode, balancing their dual roles becomes possible. Student mothers still have dreams of finishing school, and the current learning mode allows them to fulfill their academic goals. They are not required to be physically present in school, so they can just study at home while they attend to their obligations as mothers, do household chores and take care of their children. Moreover, to provide for their finances, it allows some of them to have a small business to earn extra income. Spilovoy (2021) pointed out that being in online programs makes it easy for student mothers to juggle everything—working, going to online classes, and parenting. Though the study is not in the context of modular learning, the fact that online learning is distance learning makes it relevant as, like modular learning, it does not require student mothers to be physically present in school.

However, learning is sometimes impossible in modular distance learning. Some lessons and the explanation of concepts are too complex, and the words used in the module have difficulty greater than their comprehension level. Teachers are not present to provide discussion and clarification on complex topics, so they resort to reading online references to fill in the gap in understanding. Yet, sometimes, an internet connection is not available due to lack of data load, and that makes it even harder. Findings of Bhamani et al. (2020) claimed that students are more serious in learning when the teacher is physically present, and this is seemingly impossible with modular distance learning where teachers take the task of monitoring the learners' progress (Malaya, 2020). Since teachers are seen by learners as the only learning facilitators they trust, they must conduct home visits to perform their aforesaid responsibility (Lausa et al., 2023). Likewise, learners may reach them for learning reasons via text message or messenger, whichever is available. In response to the findings, Dangle and Sumaoang (2020) stressed that teachers must be patient enough to address the students' learning needs in this mode of learning. They must also provide an immediate response to the queries in relation to learning.

Finishing school will land student mothers stable and decent jobs in the future. A regularly-paying job will ensure a brighter future for their family and help them with their finances at home or alleviate poverty. Their goal is more focused on their children so that when they complete their studies, they also gain the ability to teach them, provide for their needs, and not live the same poor life they had. Seeing their children keeps them going and gives them the power to overcome every difficulty. Continuing to study help them reach their dreams of obtaining a professional degree or career someday. At the very least, it is the path to getting a competency certification that will help them land a stable job. According to Manalang (2015), finishing school is one of the factors why student mothers pursue their studies despite their situation. Education is considered a source of confidence, and it is the only thing that cannot be stolen from them. Furthermore, when they obtain a professional degree, student mothers can apply for a job that they want. The idea that completing college will lead to success in life is what drives student mothers (Yang & Bullecer, 2016).

Andres (2021) revealed that in order to fulfil their dual responsibilities, student mothers draw motivation from their inner selves, their children, and the benefits of being a student mother. The future of their children is also impacted if they are unable to complete college (Ato, 2018). Aligned to this, Manalang (2015) also revealed that participants considered their baby their motivation and inspiration in life. Their babies are also considered their source of strength and happiness, and the main reason why they continue their studies is to give a better future for them. Even though children can create stress for student mothers trying to manage competing responsibilities between work, school, and family, they also serve as a tremendous motivational factor in a student mother's decision to attend school and persevere (Smith, 2019).

For student mothers, the school and the community can still do more to address their specific needs. For instance, the continued implementation of modular distance learning will allow them to finish their studies as it works better for their situation of juggling studies with mothering. Through its sustainability, it can help student mothers reach their life and academic goals. Ato (2018) reaffirmed the need for policymakers to take the initiative to identify areas for improvement in the Philippine higher education system and to implement the necessary policies to fully realize every females' right to an equitable education. Likewise, Spilovoy (2021) put forward that helping more mothers achieve their higher education goals should be a priority for colleges and policymakers.

Additionally, teachers can be more understanding and patient with the student mothers. Given their situation, late submission of modules, summative tests, and other tasks is inevitable. Student mothers also pointed out that assistance may be provided to them. It may be in the form of giving them free school supplies, job or livelihood programs, and, most especially, scholarships that will allow them to pursue college. They also believe that their needs and voice may be noticed if there is an organization specifically for student mothers like them.

In Lucchini-Raies, et al. (2018), student mothers indicated that they felt invisible to the authorities and lamented the lack of institutional policies that considered the condition of being a mother and student, which could be translated into concrete, practical support. In addition, students proposed some practical institutional support measures that would help students to assume the responsibilities of being a mother and students. Smith (2019) posited that student mothers tend to appreciate classes that do not require busy work and have lower course loads. Since the financial problem is the main struggle of student mothers in the Philippine setting, the student mothers hoped to have some poverty alleviation driven programs and similar mechanisms offered to them by the local and national government (Shaik, 2018).

Finally, the community, in general, may become more understanding of their situation instead of inciting social stigma on being a student mother, especially among single mothers. According to Manalang (2015), student mothers were being judged and scrutinized by other people because of their situation. Hence, they ask for understanding with regards to their situation because being a student mother is not easy to manage, but they are having difficulty showing it to other people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study makes significant contributions to research in student mothers in modular distance learning by examining their lived experiences, challenges and coping strategies. It shows that student mother face constant struggles in balancing their academic responsibilities with family duties, particularly when unexpected events like illness disrupt their routine. All hell breaks loose for student mothers, especially when someone in the family gets sick, as it means a loss of focus in studies and equals financial problems. Hence, keeping the family healthy, especially the breadwinner and small children contributes to the higher level of coping among student mothers.

For student mothers with small babies or childcare-dependent children, having parents or partners to look after and attend to the children's needs is an utmost necessity for student mothers to cope better with their situation. Though moral support truly helps them to keep going, having someone available at most times to take care of the children when needed is a bigger help. Student mothers are exposed to poverty every day, and such a situation motivates them more to improve themselves by finishing their studies because that would increase their chances of landing a decent-paying job. The center of a student mother's life is her children, and so the achievement of her goals is primarily to provide a better future for her children. Hence, it brings more hope to student mothers if programs specific to their situation are initiated in the community, especially those that will get them through college until they earn a diploma. If scholarship and livelihood programs for student mothers are available, finishing college and getting a degree is easier and even more possible. In the meantime, they are content with the current learning delivery modality as it is more applicable and responsive to their situation.

Based on these findings, several actionable recommendations for education stakeholders and policymakers emerge. Schools may establish support systems, such as reliable childcare or financial assistance to help student mothers succeed academically. Community programs offering scholarships, financial aid, and livelihood opportunities tailored to student mothers can help alleviate financial problems. Educational institutions may continue to refine the modular distance learning model to ensure it is responsive to the needs of the student mothers, making learning materials accessible and manageable to their situations. Additionally, providing counseling services to support the mental and emotional well-being of student mothers is essential, as these measures may help them overcome barriers and achieve their educational goals.

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