

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PARENTING WHILE SCHOOLING AMONG FILIPINO COLLEGE STUDENT MOTHERS IN THE PROVINCE

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*Eunica B. Sicam¹, Marianne D. Umawid²,
Jhonnabhelle D. Colot³, Januarud D. Dagdag⁴,
Ciptro Handrianto⁵*

¹Isabela State University – Roxas Campus, Philippines

²Isabela State University – Roxas Campus, Philippines

³Isabela State University – Roxas Campus, Philippines

⁴Isabela State University – Roxas Campus, Philippines

⁵Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

januard.d.dagdag@isu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of student mothers enrolled in a Philippine higher education institution situated in the province. Participants were determined using a purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: currently enrolled in the higher education institution; has at least a child; 20 years old or above. FB Messenger was used in interviewing and gathering the research data. From the thematic data analysis, four major themes were revealed: (1) challenges faced by student mothers; (2) advantages of being a student mother; (3) managing time in dual roles; and (4) support by others. The student mothers face challenges in performing their dual role such as bullying, time management, and financial problem. The student mothers, however, get source of inspiration, respect, school excuses, and important lessons in life. Their parenting experience gives them a strong personality and an inspiration to continue their education pursuits. Though managing time is really hard for them, they are able to surpass it through time management and parental help. Support systems such as their teachers, classmates, parents, friends, and relatives also play a significant role in their lives. This study provides understanding on how to make tertiary education more accessible and transformational most especially to women who handle the dual roles as students and parents.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, student mothers, lived experiences, province, parenting*

INTRODUCTION

Education contributes a crucial part in the society by developing one's skills, personality and thoughts. Education helps individuals to reach their full potential and empowers women toward sustainable development (Theirworld.org., 2016). Particularly, involvement in higher education is viewed as a gateway to success and employment for many people (Alsop, Gonzales-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008). Deciding to pursue higher education is considered one of the most consequential engagements a student would make in life

(Manalang, Liongson, & Bayubay, 2015) as it could open many opportunities for a better career and life in the future.

College students meet new people, create new circle of friends, join party and may engage to sexual activities (Manalang et al., 2015). This engagement leads to unplanned pregnancy that has been a health issue globally. Philippine Statistics Authority reported in 2014 that among the young adult women ages 15 to 24 who experienced early pregnancy and motherhood, 21 percent are with college education while 44 percent are with elementary education. Previous studies (Brooks, 2011; Hayati, 2020b; Mamabolo, Langa, & Kiguwa, 2009; Williams, Alon, & Bornstein, 2006; Wilsey, 2013) concurred that the proportion of women in higher education has steadily increased and there is also an increase of student mothers entering HEIs, which has been a global concern.

College students who are involved in early motherhood are facing various challenges as these dual roles (parenting and schooling) is not an easy task (Syuraini, 2020). Student mothers need to balance their time as a parent and as a student as well. Combining motherhood and studying without settling the activities over the other is a great dilemma for student mothers. For instance, when a woman experience motherhood role, her behaviour may contrast with this, instead of focusing all her attention on her studies (Visick, 2009). Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid (2009) highlight that being in motherhood while studying is such a challenging role. They might face different barriers including emotional pressures and negative feedback from others.

The enthusiasm of their children's success is one of the reasons student mothers re-enter university. This enables them to have a worthy starting point in life, obtain study skills, and improve quality of life (Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Rita, Muliana, & Handrianto, 2021). This was paralleled by Babineau and Packard (2006) and Mandaret and Wainwright (2010) that the most often reason for adults to re-enter to higher education is for the betterment of their family's life chances and to be a role model for their children (Syuraini, Sunarti, & Zukdi, 2019). While Wilsey (2013) argues that it was to improve their working situation. In his study, he found that 68 percent traditional college age mothers and 57 percent older mothers revealed this reason. This proved that in spite of the challenges faced by student mothers, they are determined to chase a better living.

There have been few related studies of the situation of student mothers in higher educational institutions (Brooks, 2011). Little research is available today about this especially in Philippine higher education in the provinces. Thereby, it would be a great and interesting undertaking to study the lived experiences of Filipino college student mothers in the province. This area of research could shed light on their situations in the society particularly among academic institutions in rural areas. It would raise the awareness and understanding of school stakeholders to make decisions about academic policies that are geared toward a more accessible and equitable programs.

Hence, this study described the lived experiences of student mothers, particularly inside the campus of a Philippine HEI situated in Isabela Province. Specifically, it sought to (a) determine the challenges they faced, (b) identify the advantages of being a student mother, (c) describe how they manage their time between studying and parenting, and (d) describe how they are supported by fellows.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research particularly, phenomenology. “Qualitative research enables us to make sense of reality, to describe and explain the social world and to develop explanatory models and theories. It requires the researchers constantly distinguish between another’s world and one’s own, yet become close enough to the lives of another” (Morse & Field, 1996, p. 1). Burns and Grove (2009) mentioned that qualitative research focuses on giving emphasis and explanation of the daily lived experiences and further give them meaning. Thus, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of student mothers using a phenomenological approach as their research methodology.

Participant of the Study

The participants of the study were selected purposefully using the following criteria: (a) currently studying in the identified higher education institution, (b) 20 years old or above, and (c) has at least one child. Two participants were from agriculture department: a 21-year old single mother with one-year old child and a 20-year old single mother with a 5-month old baby, respectively. The other two participants were from information technology department and college of education: a 21-year old married student mother with a 2-year old child and a 20-year old single mother with a 2-year old child.

Data Collection

The researchers observed ethical considerations in conducting the study. They asked consent from the participants for their voluntary participation in the study and informed them about the nature of their participation and the risks involved. Upon willingness to participate, the participants were interviewed through Messenger mobile application. The data was collected from November to December, 2020. Content of questions were validated. The main questions approved include “*What are the challenges you experienced as a student mother*”, “*How are you treated by others*”, “*What are the advantages you get as a student mother*”, “*How do you manage time between parenting and schooling*”, “*How are you supported by the institution*”, and “*What are the most important lessons you learned from being a student mother*”. The questions were sent and were answered by a participant in the language they are comfortable for about an hour. Follow up questions were asked based on their responses to the mentioned questions in order to clarify thoughts and gather in-depth views.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interview, the researchers began to transcribe the data and analyse it thematically. As Braun and Clarke (2006) stated, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. Researchers read the transcription of data several times to analyse the point and then searched and grouped them to formulate common categories and themes. Subthemes

emerged from corresponding major themes. Confidentiality and anonymity were ascertained in the analysis by replacing the participants' real names with codes.

RESULTS

Four major themes and with corresponding subthemes emerged from the interviews with the four student mothers, which include the following: challenges faced by student mothers (subthemes: bullying, time management, financial problem), advantages of being a student mother (source of inspiration, respect and well-raised child, school excuses, lessons acquired), managing time in dual roles (proper time management, parental help), and support by others (e. g. teachers and classmates or friends, partner, parents and relatives).

Theme 1. Challenges faced by Student Mothers

Student mothers often face challenges in their life as they enter motherhood. Theme 1 emerged from three subthemes, including:

Treatment of other people

In the Philippines, being a mother at an early age is not a norm. Bullying or judgments are inevitable in their case. But some of the student mothers use this as a motivation to become strong and finish studies. As said by one of the respondents:

Respondent #1: *"My worst experience was being bullied by other students. They laughed at me because I'm not single anymore. But because of that I strengthen myself and it drives me to pursue my study."*

However, despite the challenges experienced by student mothers, some are not receiving judgments, being treated nicely and special by their classmates. And even helping them in their needs and cope with their studies

Respondent #2: *reported they treat her special by helping her coping with school activities.*

Respondent #3: *indicated she never received a judgment, humiliation or discrimination from peers in the school. Instead they are open about her situation.*

Similarly, Respondent #4 confessed, *"I am treated the same way as the other students, but the warm welcome and understanding is the best part. They always cheer me up, and help me whenever and whatever way I need."*

Time management

Studying and parenting is not an easy role. Their time is being divided and they must know their priorities. Which according to Respondent #2, #3 and #4: They find it hard to manage their time because they need to focus with their studies as they are in college level, as well as with their responsibilities as a wife and a mother. Respondent #3 also mentioned that

managing time is hard especially when parenting struggles come to way, such as anger and restlessness. Respondent #4 also said, *“I cannot do homework when my baby is awake, I only start doing my projects or homework at around 10 p.m. because she is already sleeping.”*

Financial Problem

Financial problem is a big challenge that student mother deal with. Since they are still studying and don't have a stable job, they are struggling out of budget, thinking how to provide both child/ren's needs and school expenses.

Respondent #2 mentioned that she is having trouble budgeting her money because the expenses for online class, financial support and needs of her child are not enough to suffice these.

Respondent #4: *“I have to save from my allowance for my baby's needs like milk, diaper, and toiletries also. Sometimes my allowance is not enough for my school expenses, transportation allowance.”*

Theme 2. Advantages of being a student mother

Being a student mother is both a responsibility and inspiration. Theme 2 emerged from four subthemes, including;

Source of Inspiration

Some student mothers reported that parenting while studying is undeniably hard but it is a source of inspiration.

Respondent #1: *“It's very hard but its really inspirable because I have my family and daughter that inspire me in my study, they are the one who makes me happy and inspired.”*

Respondent #2: Being a student mother is her happy pill, it gives her a good vibe, and most especially, an inspiration to study hard.

Respect and Well-raised child

Some student mothers, as they are more experienced in life, get respect from others. And they know how hard life is at an early age, but they make sure to raise their vtchild well. These are illustrated in the following reports:

Respondent #1 mentioned, she get respect from her younger classmates.

Respondent #3 stated, she raises a more independent child as she is not always in their home to keep an eye to her baby. While Respondent #4 stated that she is able to teach her child whenever she have spare time.

School excuses

Student mothers are being considered in some school activities because they have a child to focus on in their homes. Which Respondent #1 said, *“The advantage that I get from*

being a student mother is I can excuse myself in activities in school,” concurred by Respondent #4 saying, *“I always go home early, I am excuse whenever there are school activities held at night or at the old site.”*

Lessons acquired

Student mothers are experienced persons. Through their experiences, sacrifices and hardships, they acquire life lessons. Some student mothers learned to be strong, make careful decisions, and the importance of continuing education. These are illustrated in the following reports:

Respondent #1: *I learned that in every decision you must think it carefully because it is the very important skill in our life. One mistake can ruin our dreams in life. I can no longer do what I want to do; I can't go anywhere because I have now my family.*

Respondent #3: *“The best thing I learned from being a student mother you need to be strong, a good mother and good wife. I found this to be true.”*

Respondent #4: *“Being a mother at the very young age, is not enough to stop learning and continuing what you love. And education, it is the key to have a better future, it is the best foundation I can have for myself, so I can start building my dreams and give my daughter a brighter future.”*

Theme 3. Managing time in dual roles

Parenting while studying is hard as what student mothers reported. But they are able to surpass it with proper time management and parent help. Theme 3 emerged from 2 subthemes including;

Proper Time Management

Student mothers often have a hard time managing their time. Here, household chores or everything that a normal mother is doing are being done in the morning. At night, when they babies are asleep, they take this opportunity to finished their school works. As student mothers stated:

Respondent #4: *“Managing time is not really my talent, that's why I am ending up with unfinished activities. As of this moment where pandemic really hits the world so hard, even education is being affected. I find it really hard, managing time between parenting and studying. What I do is, during daytime I do everything such as household chores, taking care of my baby, washing clothes, cooking and everything that I can do as a mom/ family member/ wife. During night time when my baby is already sleeping, I start studying, doing activities, passing it and everything.”*

Respondent #3: She manages her time by taking breaks in her studies to play with her child, *“I plan play breaks during studies, so I can concentrate on my kid ((after)).”*

Respondent #1: In household chores, she works in as fast as she can. It is very important for her to rush at house chores just for her to have time in studying and parenting.

Respondent #2: *“The time is so challenging, it is hard too, it is difficult to synchronize learning and being a mother.”*

Parental help

Student mothers who are still living in their parents get help in taking care of their children. Respondent #1 enunciated, *“It’s very hard to be a student parent, through the help of my parents in caring my daughter for me to go to school. I sacrifice my love and time, at night I will be the one to carry my daughter even if I have quizzes, I will wait for her to sleep and that’s the time I will study.”*

Theme 4: Support by others

Support system plays a big role in student mother’s journey. Regardless of their hardship, some are getting financial, physical, emotional, and moral support from support systems such as family, teachers, classmates, friends and partner. Theme 4 emerged from three subthemes, including support from teachers/classmates/friends, partner, and parents/relatives.

Teachers and classmates or friends

Teachers are being considerate when it comes to activities needed to be finished by student mothers. Their classmates and friends also guide them in school activities. This is illustrated in the following statements:

Respondent #4: *“My teachers are giving me extra time to finish my activities and submit it. When I am late I chat them and I am thankful that they do understand my situation...My classmates helped me out also, through guiding me in our activities or simply sending me the answers.”*

Respondent #1: *“...also my friends they did not give up on helping me in my studies.”*

Partner

Student mothers who are lived in and married get financial and physical support from their partner/ husband. As Respondent #2 mentioned that she is receiving financial assistance from her partner, while Respondent #3 reported that her husband is always supported in whatever she does.

Parents and relatives

Parents and relatives play a big role in student mother’s life. They are the first persons who student mothers depend and seek support into. Here, parents and relatives help them through financial assistance, emotional and moral support.

Respondent #1: Her family is still supporting her financially and emotionally as they are the one who push her to continue her dreams in life. Respondent #3 said that her parent are always there to care for her. While Respondent #2 mentioned that she is still receiving financial assistance from her mother in Saudi.

Respondent #4: "Here in our house, most of the time I am the one who take care of my daughter even if I have important meeting with our teacher, she is sitting beside me, sometimes I leave her with my tita (aunt) or cousin or sister."

DISCUSSION

Boutsen and Colbry (1991) mentioned that student mothers constitute an important growing part of a student population. This was because there was an increase of single parents attending college as higher education offers more opportunities. Researchers highlighted that being a student mother is a difficult role (Taukeni, 2014; Barnes, 2013; Funiba, 2011; Estes, 2011; Mayer, 2009). Student mothers' responsibilities outside the university have an impact in their experiences (Grenier & Burke, 2008). As student mothers continue to pursue a higher education, barriers and challenges are the obstacles in facing their dual roles. Results of the present study revealed four major themes that explored the lived experiences of student mothers in higher education, including (1) Challenges faced by student mothers; (2) Advantages of being a student mother; (3) Managing their dual roles; and (4) Support from others.

Challenges Faced by Student Mothers

Common themes about challenges encountered by student mothers were found in series of studies. According to Grenier and Burke (2008), there are barriers that exist as student mothers move along with academic path. These include demands or responsibilities, social and self-expectation which hinder their progress in studies. This was affirmed by Cabaguing (2017) and Moghadam, Khiaban, Esmaili and Salsali (2017) as they explained that juggles of student mothers includes conflicting demands, financial problems, social stigma, and self-neglect. With these, student mothers are likely to have difficulty knowing what to prioritize first. Some studies further found that gender-issue, childcare, family constraints, lack of self-belief and unresponsive institutions are the difficulties in student mothers (Alsop, Gonzales-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008; Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004).

The subthemes revealed in this current study about challenges faced by student mothers are (1) Treatment of other people, (2) Time Management, and (3) Financial problem. A subtheme was revealed by one out of four participants which is bullying as a challenge faced by student mothers. Luttrell (2003) argues that they are discriminated and are not accepted by their own peers. In addition, they also have to deal and handle judgements from others (2019). However, there are more student mothers in this study that do not receive any judgments, discrimination or criticisms from other people.

Secondly, time management which three out of four student mothers reported as a challenge. Lidgard (2004) and Taukeni (2014) found that lack of time management to expend with children, partners, families and friends, and studies are the significant difficulties that mothers face. Student mothers carry a heavy role in studentship and being involved in early motherhood increases the hardship they experience. Student mothers in this study needed to divide their time to perform their dual role. Zhang (2011) states that the diverse culture of motherhood cause them to surrender and focus on one role for the sake of the other. It can pull student mothers in one role over the other [10].

Financial problem is undeniably one of the challenges faced by student mothers. Two of four student mothers in this study admitted that they are struggling with money. This was paralleled in the findings of Vyskocil (2018) which indicated concerns about debt of student mothers, and Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2009) that student mothers consider dropping out because of financial issues. However, in the current study, student mothers continue to pursue studying and do not consider dropping out as one of their options. As Naidoo, Muthukrishna and Nkabinde (2019) emphasized, completing their schooling must be their highest priorities to ensure better life chances for their children.

Advantages of Being a Student Mother

Universities can transform student mothers as well as their children by their experiences. Despite their heavy responsibilities, there are advantages that can be acquired throughout their journey. According to Mandaret and Wainwright (2010), studying provides them with something for themselves as well as their identity, and it influenced and improved their parenting style and opinion. Furthermore, it brought a new atmosphere at home. While Van, Nelson and Niemann (1994) revealed that student mothers experiences results them as more understanding, better communicators and problem-solvers, more sympathetic, enthusiastic, tolerant, open, and less defensive. In this study, student mothers find their role as (1) a source of inspiration; (2) respect and well-raised child; (3) School excuses; and (4) Lessons acquired.

Although parenting is hard, being a student mother is a source of inspiration for studying in two out of four participants in this study. This is the same with the findings of Cabaguing (2017) that motivations and inspirations are the reasons to keep them going, and Beeler (2018) that student mother's children cause barriers to their studies, but were also a source of motivation and inspiration in pursuing postsecondary education.

Respect and well-raised child/ren are also subthemes that appear in this study. Some student mothers, they are seen as a more experienced person than those of the traditional students. As Braeken (2013) asserts that a young woman who chooses to have a child should be respected, not be laughed, and not disowned by the community. Another is student mother's way of raising their child. According to one participant in this study, she raises a more independent child and another said she has the opportunity to teach her child. This

relationship they have to their child should be good enough to help the child grow in psychological aspect (Kubeka, 2016).

The third and fourth subthemes in this major theme are (3) School excuses, which this study finds that student mothers see school excuses as an advantage; and (4) the lessons acquired from being a student mother. Their role as a student and as a mother enables them to learn better decision-making and the importance of education in their life, and acquire a strong personality. This was supported by Griffiths (2002) that their general experience they developed particular skills and understanding was identified. Aside from motherhood, they discover other potentials. Berg and Mamhute (2013) and Ferrer and Sevilla (2019) assert that they adopted coping strategies and enable them to realize inner strength and self-discovery.

Managing Dual Roles

Two subthemes appear in this study including (1) Proper time management and (2) Parental help. Balancing dual roles increases pressures to student mothers (2009). Cabaguing (2017) found that time management and priority is one way to manage student mother's roles. They make it sure that they can manage each role despite their busy schedule as both family and studies are priorities. In this study, proper time management of student mothers is done by playing their role or responsibilities as a mother and a wife in the morning (household chores; taking care of their child) and being a student at night. Also, parent's help in taking care of student mother's child while they are studying is a huge help in managing their dual roles. As Griffiths (2002) finds that the support of other people helps them to manage their dual roles although they stated that their current situation is hard.

Potocnik (2017) enumerated ways on how to manage both roles. (1) Be realistic and must focus one subject at a time, (2) Know what to prioritize, (3) Be honest with professors and must establish a fair relationship with them, (4) Plan ahead, particularly your daily routine, (5) Remember that you need a break despite busy schedule, (6) Think positively. Student's families may also serve as a motivation for the achievement of a student mother (Wilsey, 2013).

Support from Others

Supports from families, partners, and friends are important to help student mothers. Griffiths (2002) stated that available people such as family members, friends, and partners who support them are crucial in helping them to cope with their experiences. Student mothers stated that when they are financially and morally supported by family, partner, classmates or friends, they are still be able to manage the student and mother role. This is concurred by our study that student mothers are getting financial, physical, emotional and moral support by their teachers and classmates or friends, partners, and parents and relatives. Taukeni (2014), Boutsen and Colbry (1991), and Bruns (2004) suggest that institutional leaders, instructors can support them as a means to reduce and relieve their stress, loneliness and isolation.

However, no one among the participants in this present study mentioned that they are getting support from Universities or programs in their community. Suggestions from the different researches were the support system for student mothers (Brown & Amankwaa, 2007). Mwaifuge (2015) and Berg and Mamhute (2013) found that the main challenge faced by student mothers in higher education is accommodation. When they became pregnant, they take accommodation out of school campus. Alsop et al. (2008) similarly found that there is relatively little attention within government policy with regards to this. Brown and Nichols (2012) argue that it is crucial to organize programs and policies regarding pregnant and parenting students. In their study there were four subthemes emerge pertaining to this: day care on campus, financial aid, scheduling and classes (Handrianto, Rasool, Rahman, Mustain, & Ilhami, 2021), and transportation. Taukeni (2014), Boutsen and Colbry (1991), and Bruns (2004) added that there are supposed to be a student mother's group for the support and services that they will be acquiring within the university. Similarly, Berg and Mamhute (2013) recommended that institutions should establish an office counselling pregnant and with infant/s students. In addition, authorities should develop a working relationship which focuses on ensuring the resources to support their learning system (Rita & Handrianto, 2020). Naidoo, Muthukrishna and Nkabinde (2019) suggested that intervention is needed not only at schools but also in families, and community levels. Hence, the previous researches emphasize that partnership between community and institutions can make student mothers being reframed from being invisible (Hayati, 2020).

In contrast to this, they may experience different problems emotionally, mentally, or physically. If society fails to guide and sustain the support they need, they are likely to suffer from anxiety, guilt, anger, stigmatisation, isolation and low self-esteem (Berg & Mamhute, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on the experiences of student mothers entering higher education. Based on the findings in this research, the student mothers face challenges in performing their dual role such as bullying, time management, and financial problem. In spite of these hurdles, there are benefits acquired from being a student and a mother, including source of inspiration, respect and well-raised child, school excuses and the lessons acquired. With these, they use the lessons learned and get more motivated or inspired to study and continue education pursuits. While we find that managing time is really hard for them, they are able to surpass it through the utilization of proper time management and parental help. However, support systems such as teachers and classmates or friends, partner, parents and relatives are also a big part in student mother's financial, physical, emotional, moral support needs.

However, there were some limitations encountered in conducting this study. This includes our inability to gather the desired data through face-to-face interview and the sensitivity and privacy of student mothers while answering the interview questions. Similarly,

there were only four participants who responded our chats and calls and all of them came from the same higher education institution.

Hence, this study suggests the following to future researchers, Universities and/or Local Government Units (LGUs): (1) include more participants in conducting the study; (2) use in-depth semi-structured interview in gathering data; (3) explore student mothers' lives before and after having a child or children; (4) universities should develop a culture of respect for all, and continually empower student mothers in parenting-schooling roles and responsibilities; and (5) the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Local Government Units, and other concerned agencies may consider creating and offering a scholarship program to support student mothers' financial assistance.

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