



Hoping against hope: Unveiling stories of college student-mothers

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the plights of college student-mothers of Legacy College of Compostela. The focus was on understanding the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of student-mothers. Ten participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews. Participants juggled between their roles as students and mothers, struggling with time management and societal judgments. However, their determination to succeed and support from family fueled their perseverance. Despite negative stereotypes, they found inspiration in their children and developed resilience. Coping mechanisms included seeking advice, maintaining positivity, and managing time effectively. School support varied, with some receiving significant assistance while others faced limited support. Overall, the experiences of student-mothers reflect a complex interplay of challenges, resilience, and determination, ultimately enabled by unwavering commitment and support.

Keywords: Challenges, coping strategies, experiences, hoping against hope, insights, motivations, unveiling stories

Introduction

Student-mothers teach us many lessons in life. At the first glance we look at them as normal people who simply exist without any yoke carried on their shoulder. However, their existence inspired me to be open-minded in any situation they may encounter. Hence, looking at their dual role of being a mother and student motivates me to study their experiences.

Education is for all and is vital in developing one's skills, personality and thoughts. It enables individuals to be a crucial part in the society. The involvement of students in higher education is viewed as a gateway to success and employment for many people (Alsop, *et al.*, 2008) ^[1]. Education is an essential part of the society. However, with the benefits of education, women and girls continue to face multiple barriers based on gender and its intersections with other factors, such as age, ethnicity, poverty, and disability, in the equal enjoyment of the right to quality education. It is estimated that 15 million girls mainly those living in poverty will never set foot in a classroom, compared to 10 million boys. According to UNESCO estimates, around the world, 129 million girls are out of school, including 32 million of primary school age, and 97 million of secondary school age. In Namibia, the enrolment of female students at tertiary institution has been reported to be higher after the country's independence in 1990. This predominantly consists of mothers returning to school or starting the university late. There are also growing number of student mothers who gave birth either in high school or during their studies (McCullum and Schuylen, 2003). Wilsey, 2013 and Hayati, 2020 ^[6] 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.

In the Philippines, the 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. Syuraini, 2020, expressed that college students who are involved in early motherhood are

facing various challenges as these dual roles (parenting and schooling) is not an easy task. However, the enthusiasm of their children's success is one of the reasons student mothers reenter university or colleges.

In over two years of teaching at Legacy College of Compostela, the researcher has encountered students from various walks of life. Some students are fortunate enough to study without facing financial or emotional challenges. Others struggle with financial difficulties and experience emotional instability. Additionally, some students balance their academic activities with parental duties and responsibilities. Among these, the researcher considers student mothers to be in the most challenging situation.

During the 2023-2024 school year, there were approximately 40 student mothers enrolled at Legacy College of Compostela, making up only 2.5 percent of the college department's total student population. However, exploring the plights of college student mothers pursuing different courses at Legacy College of Compostela presents a valuable and interesting opportunity. This research aims to examine the challenges and experiences of student mothers in balancing academics and parenthood, their coping strategies for managing dual roles, and their insights and support systems. Motivated by these factors, the researcher is driven to embark on this study.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the plights of college student-mothers of Legacy College of Compostela. This study employed qualitative method which focuses on giving emphasis and explanation of the daily lived experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms and insights of the student-mothers to further give them meaning. This study could serve as a tool for teachers or school administration to understand and become more informed of the lived experiences of student- mothers and enable teachers to discuss meaningfully on improving their strategies in response to student- mothers' challenges and experiences. The findings of the study hope to attain the biggest possible result of understanding the situation and

may also be used by the school guidance counselor to create seminars and intervention for the betterment of student-mothers in Legacy College of Compostela. This is an important contribution to the study of student- mothers because it fills a gap in the literature, especially in Davao de Oro, where studies on college student- mothers are lacking.

Theoretical Lens

This research is anchored on the Feminist Standpoint Theory, emerged in the 1970's. In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (1990)*, American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins proposed a form of standpoint theory that emphasizes the perspective of African American women. Collins argued that the matrix of oppression—an interlocking system of race, gender, and class oppression and privilege—provides African American women with a distinctive point of view for understanding their marginalized status (Borland, 2020).

It focused on the knowledge that comes from the experiences and challenges that were common to women (Wood, 2009). This theory allowed for an understanding of women's experiences as well as challenges in having a child. Moreover, Nelson (2009) argues that feminist theory ensures the equality of opportunity and individual freedom can ensure that all members of a society may fulfil their potential. Green (2007) asserts that feminism analyses the diversity of women's specific experiences.

In conducting this research, the researcher aimed to strike a balance between emphasizing shared experiences among student-mothers and recognizing the diversity in their individual journeys. The success of this endeavor is anticipated to make a valuable contribution to the existing body of research in this specific area. Furthermore, it aspires to provide meaningful insights that can enhance the overall well-being of the clientele.

With this regard, the conceptual framework of this study was focused on the challenges, experiences, coping mechanisms, support system, insights and motivations of College student- mothers. Out from the findings of the study, an intervention plan is formulated.

Research Questions

The study sought to explore the plights of College student-mothers in Legacy College of Compostela.

Specifically, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the participants as student-mothers?
2. What are the challenges encountered by the participants as student- mothers?
3. What mechanism did the participants as student-mothers utilize in coping the challenges encountered?
4. What are the insights of the participants regarding their plights as a student- mothers?
5. What are the different programs suggested based on the findings of the study?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

Using a qualitative phenomenological research approach, the limitation of the study was the number of participants who are 10 College student- mothers and the locale of the study is in Legacy College of Compostela. Moreover, the findings of the study recommend the implementation of the

intervention program such as seminars, trainings, and support system for the betterment of the student-mothers addressed by the school guidance counselor. Also, the findings of the study are not general and it does not reflect all the student- mothers, hence, the validity of the study is only limited according to the participant's culture, society, and environment of the participants experiences.

Method

Research Design

This study utilized qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach, to explore the experiences of college student-mothers at Legacy College of Compostela. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences regarding a particular phenomenon as described by participants according to Creswell (2009). The focus was on understanding the challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights of student-mothers. Ten participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data was collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews. This methodological approach aligns with the qualitative requirement of having five to 25 participants for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007).

Research Participants

The participants of this research were 10 student- mothers of Legacy College of Compostela from Education, BSBA, and Criminology Department. Their active participation on the interview is very important for the achievement of gathering the data. In selecting the informants of the study, the researcher used non- probability type of sampling, particularly purposive sampling.

These college student- mothers were determined by the following criteria: (a) female- either single or married, (b) 18- 35 years old, (c) currently enrolled in Legacy College of Compostela, (d) has a child/children, (e) has the custody of the child, and (f) willing to participate in the study.

The participants were requested to sign an inform consent form and agreed to the condition stipulated that they were voluntarily participating and were willing to impart their knowledge as needed in the study. Also, the use of pseudonym was employed to protect the identity of the participants in the data analysis and reporting. Moreover, the research participants were given an orientation about the study and were asked to participate through an in-depth interview as means of data collection. The researcher utilized a semi- structured interview guide using validated interview questions as an instrument in generating the data from the participants. Also, transcript of interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher employed an in-depth interview with the participants in collecting data using multilingual in interviewing the participants. In this research, the researcher used different kinds of data sources in getting information from research participants. Creswell (2009), suggested that gathering of data should happen in the natural setting which could be developed through observations, interviews, documents, or audio- visual materials.

Furthermore, among those data gathering technique cited by Creswell (2009), interviews were the primary method of data collection in the phenomenological study. The researcher used face to face and audio-visual material

methods of interview. Interviewing helps researchers appreciate experiences they may not have had or offers them a different viewpoint on an experience. They also said that interviewing is the best method for providing insight into personal and sensitive issues.

Before conducting the study, the researcher followed the standard process and specific protocol of data gathering by seeking first the approval of the Dean of the Graduate School for him to permit to conduct the study and certification coming from the Assumption College of Nabunturan- Research Ethics Committee. The researcher solicited help from Legacy College of Compostela by sending formal consent, and intent letter addressed to the Office of Administration of Legacy College of Compostela with an attachment of an endorsement letter from Assumption College of Nabunturan.

After the above- mentioned offices approved the request letter, the researchers then met the participants to discuss the plan to carry out the IDI. Informants were given an informed consent as their permission and informed them of the schedules of the interview. Moreover, Whatley (2005) said that in gathering of information from our research participants, it is important that we sustain a friendly atmosphere so that they will feel more comfortable with the conversations.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the thematic analysis in analyzing the information drawn through the IDI. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing and reporting pattern or themes with a data (Boyatzis, 1998, Roulston, 2001). Using thematic analysis on this study is very helpful because it is flexible and useful research tool that can probably grant a substantial, complex, and rich account of the data.

After collecting the data in the field, the researcher used transcription to make sense of the details which was done through converting all data into text. The researcher focused on the narrated experiences of the research participants and avoid the biases. With this thing, the researcher endured his own experiences to the experiences of the participants in the research to come up with an authentic data that truly help the study.

Moreover, in the familiarization of the data, the researcher listened the audio-recordings and read the transcript thoroughly to draw a deeper understanding of the information gathered. After which, the researcher identifies the initial codes that deliver significance and interest. Coding is the process of categorizing data into principles, properties, trends, or emerging themes in qualitative research.

Lastly, interpretative analysis together with the identified codes is undergone. The data were sorted in accordance with major themes considering their relationships with the codes, sub-themes and themes, and this however, were refined several times for a solid and specific result of theme.

Ethical considerations

The researcher observed the following dimensions of research ethics such as social value, informed consent, vulnerability issues, risk-benefit ratio, privacy and confidentiality of information, justice, transparency, adequacy of facilities, and community involvement.

Findings

The information drawn from the In-depth Interview was categorized and thematically analyzed. In keeping with the research ethics for qualitative research, codes had been used in order to conceal the identities of the research participants. The presentation of the result was done according to the order of specific research questions used in this study. Five research questions lead to five major themes; (1) Most Notable Experience as a Student-mother, (2) Problematic Experiences as a Student-mother, (3) Ways Used in Handling Problems Encountered, (4) Realizations Being a Student-mother, and (5) Suggested Intervention Programs from Student-mothers.

1. Most Notable Experience as a Student-mother.

The responses generated seven themes: torn between studies and child rearing, never thought of stopping from going to school, bring baby to school, bring newborn child to school, going to school late and failure to attend activities, problem where to leave child, being called in the guidance due to absences; and limited leisure time. One of the example themes is discussed below.

Torn between Studies and Child Rearing. This theme constituted the primary experience of dilemma of being a student and a mother. It is somehow considered as a moral dilemma of being a student-mother because two of these choices are all both good or for the betterment of itself. Informant 8 explained her experiences where she is in the confusion and challenges arises as a student-mother. She pointed out;

The most notable experienced I have as a student mother was the difficulty to keep up between taking care of my child at the same time studying. There was a time that I took studying until 3 o' clock at dawn and at the same time giving care to my child. It is really difficult. Post- partum is also all true.

2. Problematic Experiences as a Student-mother

The responses produced six themes: financial problem, problem with time management, nobody to take care of child, no allowance for school, problem with complying school works, and underwent post-partum but only one theme had been discussed.

Financial Problem. One of the most fundamental problems of everyone is money. If a normal student has problems with financial matters, how about the student-mothers? It is predominant that financial problem is such a chronic problem because everything follows if you are equip.

Informant 3 narrated her situation;

The most problematic situation that I encounter is the financial problem. Everytime the semester ends and the signing of clearance, it really frustrating to budget our finances because I have also children who are already students. The salary of my husband can only suffice on our daily needs.

3. Ways Used in Handling Problems Encountered

The following were the themes: sought advice from elders, to be optimistic, sought help from parents, try to balance responsibilities, find ways to generate money, keep fighting despite the odds, keep things lightly, offer problems to God, and save money. However, only one theme discussed.

Sought Advice from Elders. This theme emphasized how important it is to have an adviser serves as a guiding light and inspiration to surpass all the challenges in life. Informant 3 narrated;

I am a person who likes stories. I usually ask words of wisdom from old. My grandmother is one of those persons who always give me words of wisdom. Moreover, just be open minded, and prayer is my weapon to manage everything.

4. Realizations Being a Student-mother

The themes were embedded with getting married early not a good decision, not easy being a mother, experienced difficulty but manageable, need to be stable before committing for marriage, studies first before marriage, do not bear any remorse, situations make people stronger, and divided attention not easy to handle.

Getting Married Early not a Good Decision. Realization made when they were in the situation that married life is not made easy at all. That is why they come up to a certain perspective of not getting married earlier. Informant 4 has this to say;

Never engage to early marriage because it is not easy especially in this present time where goods are too expensive.

Moreover, informant 5 emphasized the same sentiment as she added;

Married life is not that easy, that's why do not come in a hurry because life today is so difficult. You will regret in the end.

5. Suggestions to Address Issues as Basis for Intervention Program

The different themes presented to gather responses are the following: scholarship program for student-mothers, forum on teenage pregnancy awareness, special privileges during activities or internship, and skills and psycho-emotional seminars.

Scholarship Program for Student-mothers. One of the best suggestions for student-mother to alleviate financial problem is to avail of a scholarship program. Informant 1 emphasized her suggestion;

Hopefully, the school will help all student mothers like me through scholarship program because one of the problems is the financial matters.

The same suggestion emphasized by informant 2 as she said;

One of my suggestion is scholarship program because as a student and parent our financial aspect will be divided. Secondly, hopefully there will be cash assistance provided by the school. Thirdly, a seminar to encourage the student-mothers to pursue their study.

Discussions and Conclusion

The presentation of the discussions was divided into four subsets: a.) the experiences, b.) the challenges encountered, c.) mechanism utilize in coping with the challenges, and d.) insights and realization of the participants on their plights as student- mothers. The discussion section accentuates the identified themes, derived from the study's results, and correlates them with relevant literature and previous studies. The collected data yielded several themes, which are elaborated upon in the subsequent discussion.

Discussions

The structured themes and the emerging themes were made as foundation in broadening the discussion of the findings in this study. As each theme was linked to related literature and studies, a substantial discussion was made to find their alignment with the theme.

Most Notable Experience as a Student-mother. The emerging themes in this structured theme are torn between studies and child rearing, never thought of stopping from going to school, bring baby to school, bring newborn child to school, problem where to leave child, being called in the guidance due to absences, and limited leisure time.

The findings revealed that most of their notable experiences were somehow challenges them to meet both ends of responsibilities. However, these experiences made the informants become more resilient and flexible with their duties at home and in school. Being torn between studies and child rearing becomes a moral dilemma to some informants. To manage between roles of a mother at the same time as college students is not easy and the ability to focus on one thing becomes impossible. As much as they wanted to keep their child under their care, they never also thought of stopping from going to school because they have the dreams to pursue and their child's future becomes their motivation not to quit. For instance, one of the unforgettable experiences of the informants was bringing their child/newborn child to school while having their classes or examination because they do not have a choice or they have a common problem of where to leave their child.

Advantages of Being Student-Mother. The emerging themes were getting inspiration from child, able to prepare for the future, able to make wise decisions in life, and being happy seeing own offspring. The findings show that amidst the difficulties encountered by the student mothers they still found and inspiration to continue life with positive mind. Getting inspiration from child is the common ground of the participants. After all the tiredness, problems, and stresses in managing time between responsibilities, their child become their source of strength, happiness, motivation and encouragement to pursue their studies, to continue their work, and to reach their goals. Furthermore, to be able to prepare for the future is the goal of a student- mother in pursuing their study to be able to find a good work in the future and become capable enough of providing the needs of their child or children. The experiences of a student mother taught them to make wise decision in life making them strong enough and not easier to give up in life. Also, another advantage experienced of a student- mother is the feeling of happiness seeing their own offspring. Seeing their child lightens the burdens they carry after all the hard works they been through on that day.

Disadvantages of Being a Student-Mother. The emerging themes were balancing school and family responsibilities, failure to attend to school activities, and making both ends meet. From the result of the study, student mothers admittedly shared their experienced about balancing school and family responsibilities which is a tough commitment. The difficulty between studying and taking care of the child is the common agony of the participants. With a great concern to the child, student mothers failed to attend school activities like participation, group works, and other school practices because no one could take care the child. On their studies, sometimes, they lost their focus on learning and studying the lesson because of prioritizing their child needs

and time. Comparing to a single life, becoming a mother endures lots of responsibilities and meeting both ends of being a student and at the same time is difficult especially in the aspect of financial matters combining the obligation of school fees and their child's basic needs.

Problematic Experiences as a Student-mother. The emerging themes were financial problem, problem with time management, nobody to take care of child, no allowance for school, problem with complying school works, and underwent post-partum. Added to the disadvantage experienced by the student mothers are the problematic issues encountered by them. To expound, it is firstly the financial problem that is hard to deal by most of the student-mothers. When it comes to budgeting between school fees and their baby's need or family, in which, both are two important responsibilities for them. Even though, some of the student-mothers were supported by their parents, still, the budget is not enough. In connection to this, some student mother go to school with no allowance or fare because she prioritizes on buying milk for the baby.

Ways Used in Handling Problems Encountered. The emerging themes were sought advice from elders, to be optimistic, sought help from parents, try to balance responsibilities, find ways to generate money. keep fighting despite the odds, keep things lightly, offer problems to god, and save money. The results showed that amidst all the difficult situations and problems experienced by student mothers, they learned to have ways to cope with the problems and challenges faced in managing both roles. It is important for a student mother who have no enough experience in life to sought advice from elders. It is not a shame to ask for a help to someone who can deeply understand their situation mostly from their mothers, mother-in-law and even grandmother. To sought help from parents as their constant companion cannot be denied by most student mothers because of the difficulty doing it all alone especially on taking care of the child while in school. This is a common reality that parents are always there to help its family. Moreover, their words of wisdom and helping hands become their guiding light and inspirations to the road they are taken and to surpass all the challenges with an open mind and prayers as their weapon.

Assistance Received from Family. The responses elicited one emerging theme, full support from family. it is evident from the study that most of the student mothers have found out their true companion from their family. The full support from their family is a big help for a student mother who are struggling to meet the responsibilities of their roles. Their parents, partners, siblings, and even in-laws supported them mostly on finances and taking care of the baby They help sustaining their baby's milk, give them allowances, tuition fees and other means of finances. Student mothers not only supported financially but also morally especially their husband and mother as their source of encouragement in everything they do. Their mothers and in laws become their companion in taking care of the baby while they were juggling in school activities and classes. The life of a student mother is tough, but with genuine support from others, life becomes easy.

Assistance Received from School. The responses elicited the following emerging themes: moral support and understanding from teachers, no assistance from school, advices from teachers, scholarship from school, and soft loan from school. Aside from the full support received by

the student mothers from their families, the participants also receive different forms of assistance from the school. The moral support and understanding from teacher are more than enough a sign of concern and consideration to their situations through giving them ample time to submit their requirements, giving them extensions, scholarship and babysitting their child at the moment of their examination. Besides, college teachers also supporting them by giving them pieces of advice as a student.

Realizations Being a student-mother. The responses elicited the following emerging themes: getting married early not a good decision, not easy being a mother, experienced difficulty but manageable, need to be stable before committing for marriage, studies first before marriage, do not bear any remorse, situations make people stronger, divided attention not easy to handle. According to the result of the study, student mothers have learned lot of lessons and realizations from their life situation both positive and negative experiences. Student mothers realize that getting married early is not a good decision. It is not an ideal decision in this present time knowing the economic crises we have in the country and the needs becomes expensive. Student mothers look back on their life with no regrets but they pointed out that, women need to be stable before committing to marriage or need to study first before marriage.

Hopes and Dreams as a Student-Mother. The responses elicited only one emerging themes, to finish studies. The emerging theme showed that college student mothers have a common goal which to finish their study despite of the challenges in all aspect of a mother at the same students. The participants are motivated to finish their study in order to become a licensed teacher, to find a decent job with good salary, to be able to provide enough for their child's future, and to get married officially.

Suggestions to Address Issues as Basis for Intervention Program. The responses elicited the following emerging themes, scholarship program for student-mothers, forum on teenage pregnancy awareness, special privileges during activities or internship, and skills and psycho-emotional seminars. According to the result of the study, one of the hopes a student mothers in order to lessen financial problem is the benefits of Scholarship Program for student mothers like cash assistance particularly for a student mother because most of them have no enough budget to sustain both school and child/family obligations. Moreover, conducting seminars to student mothers particularly on skills and psycho-emotional seminars and forums about teenage pregnancy awareness also post-partum seminars were the highlighted suggestions from the student-mothers. This is to introduce teenagers to be aware of the situation before entering into difficult responsibilities by establishing the emotional stability, skills and abilities and imposed knowledge about the pros and cons of being student mothers.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest several implications for practical application.

On Student-Mothers Experienced difficulties on Schooling and Child-rearing. It can be disseminated the experience of student-mothers about their personal narration of life to be a light for everyone. It is also an implication for the researcher to influence others to highlight that student-

mothers have carried the difficult situation in life. This is not to brag their capacity to elevate their capacity as a person but to show their life of uneasiness so that others may give more respect.

On the Effect of Well-being. As noted in the findings of the study, there are mutual effects to the well-being of student-mothers. They may experience stressful moments but they may also experience of not affected by these influences. However, others may come to the point of being sick because of health condition. Therefore, it should be noted that being a student-mother should not always look at the negative side of life but to look after their physical health.

On Actions Done to the Disadvantages of being a Student-Mother. The act of balancing between studies and child rearing would always not an easy task. There is always a disadvantage in this matter. A person should always be strong in dealing on this matter. That is why, time management is the best way to handle the disadvantages experienced by student-mothers and for other students as well.

On Assisting the Problematic Experienced of a Student-Mother. In view of the problem by the student-mother especially in financial matters. It would also consider the support of individuals to the problem experienced by student-mothers. It could be considered to apprehend the financial problem for example to settle by asking some help from the government or DSWD agency with financial assistance offered.

On Negative Connotation from Other People. Among the effects were loss of encouragement hearing negative comments from other people would always ruin the concentration of a student-mother. Life expectation would not define the entirety of a person. It conveys that the manifestation of becoming a person should not be forced by others thinking of a person. Hence, avoidance of others' expectation would always be the best thing to consider.

On Suggestions to Address Issues as Basis for Intervention Program. This should be endorsed to the different agencies in the government or any institution who has love for helping students to succeed in life.

Implications for Future Research

In as much as the study was limited to the responses of the student-mothers studying at Legacy College of Compostela, Compostela, Davao de Oro, the following implications for future research must be considered:

First, future research can be conducted with the same type of participants coming from other schools either PHEI's, LUC's, and SUC's. Second, future research may be conducted to further investigate the sentiments and experiences including their coping mechanism.

Finally, with the data generated from the participants, Legacy College of Compostela can use this as their tool to study the plight of student-mothers mitigate the challenges they faced every day.

Concluding Remarks

The study aimed to explore the challenges faced by student-mothers in pursuing education and how they coped with these challenges. Participants juggled between their roles as students and mothers, struggling with time management and societal judgments. However, their determination to succeed and support from family fueled their perseverance. Despite negative stereotypes, they found inspiration in their children

and developed resilience. Coping mechanisms included seeking advice, maintaining positivity, and managing time effectively. School support varied, with some receiving significant assistance while others faced limited support. Overall, the experiences of student-mothers reflect a complex interplay of challenges, resilience, and determination, ultimately enabled by unwavering commitment and support.

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