

CAREER PATHWAYS: DISCOURSES OF MOTHERS IN THE ACADEME

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to gather information in exploring the discourses of the student-mothers in the academe impacting struggles, hopes, aspirations, and their coping mechanisms employed on the different pressures they faced. The following research objectives informed this research: to describe the struggles and journey of student-mothers; to determine the hopes and aspirations of student-mothers; and to determine the coping mechanisms of student-mothers of the different pressures they are facing. This phenomenological study explored and described the experiences of student mothers. A researcher-made interview guide questionnaire was used in gathering data. This study also involved collecting, compiling, and analyzing data gathered through semi-structured interviews. From the three major themes, namely: 1) struggles and journey; 2) hopes and aspirations; and 3) coping mechanisms; twelve sub-themes emerged which included time management, financial concerns, negative criticisms from people, motherhood responsibilities, health reasons, intellectual challenges, to complete a degree, to land a job immediately for a better life, to make the family proud, strengthening family bond, self-motivation, and support from family, friends, and teachers. This research implies encouragement to other mothers to continue their incomplete education even if they already have children or families of their own. Further, the research suggests a motivation to push and work harder for still; victory awaits those who sacrifice and persevere. Future directions are also discussed in this study.

Keywords: career pathways, discourses, mothers in the academe, phenomenological study, Philippines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Customarily, the undergraduate years are considered as a period of self-disclosure, investigation, and autonomy; however, when college students marry, what happens to those values? Individuals ordinarily do not characterize marriage in individual terms but rather think of it as an association in which every part gives up some of their autonomy (McQuillan & Boyd, 2005). In today's times, an increase in early-age motherhood is rampant. However, it is good to note that most early-age mothers are back in the academe or have never really left schooling amidst the struggles. Also, cases like early marriages, but they opted to go back and continue achieving a degree. Student-mothers, as they are called, are now common in society which is seen to experience struggles as they hurdle for their degrees.

College students are exposed to many family, financial, peers, and school environment problems. As he continued and finally ended his courses enrolled in college, various stressors hampered the successful attainment of his primary and secondary goals. Everyday stressors affect college students: intrapersonal, interpersonal, academic, and environmental stressors (Bulo & Sanchez, 2014).

For more than ten (10) years in teaching, I heard different stories of mothers in the academe. Some stories were good, and some were not. For instance, I encountered one time in my class "Sir, pwede na ko muuli ug una kay gikalintura akong baby?" (Sir, can I go ahead, my baby has a fever?). This scenario made me think how difficult it was to become a mother and as a student. Combining motherhood and learning without compromising either one's activities is a huge problem (Behboodi, Ordibeheshti Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali, 2017).

I believe that, while student mothers are very much responsible in their school activities, examinations, and other school works, small programs must be taken into account for the support, especially to the low-income student mothers in the academe and to those who single-handedly take care of their children. Generally, I have been teaching in the school for several years, which has only made the issue more accessible to be observed and more important to discuss from my position, as opposed to this scenario.

The different studies cited above and my experiences as a teacher and having students with unique and peculiar characteristics prompted me to conduct this study. I wish to explore their experiences in pursuing a college education despite motherhood responsibilities and discover the challenges they are facing and the commitment and resiliency they employed to finish their course.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to explore the discourses of the student-mothers in the academe impacting struggles, hopes, and aspirations and their coping mechanism employed on the different pressures they faced. This study attempted to collect the experiences on how they manage their schooling and motherhood status.

Research Questions

My study explored the experiences of Elementary and Secondary Education women students who have a child or have children.

Specifically, the following questions were asked: (1) What are the struggles and journeys of student mothers? (2) What are the hopes and aspirations of student mothers? and (3) What are the coping mechanisms of student-mothers of the different pressures they face?

II. METHODS

Research Design

I used qualitative research and specifically employed a phenomenological approach in this study, where an extensive construction process takes in the understanding and interpretation of individuals. As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed: how people make sense of their surroundings and the events that occur in their lives (Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (1998) defined phenomenology as "researchers look for basics, unchanging structure (or essence), or the experience's central underlying meaning, emphasizing the intentionality of consciousness, which includes both the outward appearance and internal consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning."

The phenomenological inquiry is particularly well-suited to address the meanings and perspectives of this study's research participants as the primary concern of phenomenological analysis is to understand "how the everyday, inter-subjective world is constituted" (Schwandt, 2000) from the participants' perspective.

Research Participants

The key informants of my study "Career Pathways: Discourses of Mothers in the Academe" were the seven (7) education students who were officially enrolled at UM Penaplata College, the school year 2019-2020. The informants chosen are regularly attending classes and were purposely selected.

Data Collection

This started with a request to the School Director of UM Peñaplata College that I might be allowed to conduct this study.

I used the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in which, according to Krueger (2014), a focus group consists of 7-10 persons who have never met before. These participants were selected because they have specific characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. The moderator or interviewer created a permissive and nurturing environment that encourages different perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote, plan or reach consensus. The group discussion was conducted several times with similar participants to identify trends and patterns in perceptions. Careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides clues and insights into how the group perceives a product, service, or opportunity.

In gathering the information, I used a voice recorder during the discussion. The FGD lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. I transcribed all recorded answers of the participants. The results were checked and analyzed by the data analyst.

Role of the Researcher

In this endeavor, I employed the Focus Group Discussion and acted as the interviewer. I also acted as the moderator, and I assigned reliable assistants who served as encoders, recorders, and time managers. The information from the interview and the FGD session, such as the key informants' shared experiences, opinions, and suggestions, were saved in a voice recorder gadget and kept in the computer document. Further, I also portrayed being the transcriber after the interview. Lastly, after the data analyst had given me the themes, I presented and interpreted the results.

Data Analysis

Following the Positioning Theoretical Analysis, the informants' responses were processed and conducted with a series of analyses.

Transcripts were coded in considerable detail, with the focus shifting back and forth from the key claims of the participants to my interpretation of the meaning of the responses. After which, the respondents' replies were clustered according to themes. Emergent themes were analyzed and subjectively interpreted.

This study also utilized thematic content analysis to weed out biases and establish overarching data impressions. Rather than approaching my data with a predetermined framework, identify common themes as I searched the materials organically. My goal was to find common patterns across the data set (Canary, 2021).

Lastly, to check and establish the validity of my research, environmental triangulation was employed to identify which environmental factor, if any, may influence the information I received during the study. As emphasized by Abdalla, Oliveira, Azevedo, & Gonzales (2018), in this type of triangulation, data collection techniques are used under different environmental circumstances, such as the time of day, day of the week, the season of the year, or temperature, among other elements and variables that might influence the phenomenon under examination.

Ethical Considerations

I ensured that the key informants gave their informed consent before participating in the study. I also applied the necessary and appropriate procedures in conducting the interviews to protect each research participant's privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. According to the study of Mertens (2018), researchers should adopt ethical guidelines based on development for cross-cultural research when working with people. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2017) suggests a few guidelines for working with individual participants; we need to respect them individually, such as not stereotyping them and using their language and names for the non-discriminatory language. Consent from the participants was accomplished before the Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

Trustworthiness

I am responsible for seeking out ideas from different authors concerning the trustworthiness of my study, qualitative research. According to Burke and Christensen (2015), qualitative research is credible when it objectively interprets a human experience with the same interpretation as the person who shares that experience. In addition, Mertens (1998) cited that information is credible when it solely reflects the informant's viewpoint and research conditions. I am guided with the following criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggles and Journey of Student Mothers

Time management. This theme flourished as participants have emphasized that due to several things to do as a student and at the same time as a mother and a wife, they find it difficult to maximize their time which leads them to have problems in school or at home. This was emphasized as they stated:

Time management kay layo man kay diba kaputian unya San Isidro pa jud amua unya padulong ug kuan sa 30 minutes unya kana pud time management unsaon nimo pag kuan. (Time management because our place, Kaputian, is far. It will take me 30 minutes to travel.) RQ1 MQ1P4

Mao na akuang struggle kanang ang time management akuang struggle. (My struggle is in time management.) RQ1 MQ1 P3

As observed in the participants' responses, they take time management as a challenge as they hurdle school and family together. Maximizing their time in taking care of their children and being a wife is way too difficult, especially when no nanny or other family members could assist. Also, they mostly find themselves significantly challenged in giving significant time to spend with schooling, bonding with children, and doing chores at home. Several studies (Astin, 1993; Griffiths, 2002; Lidgard, 2004) cited that mothers pursuing higher education are also burdened by the financial strains of paying for childcare in addition to regular living expenses and study-related costs (such as course fees, books, travel, and so on). In addition, lack of time to spend with their children, their partners, their families and friends, and to complete assignments and study has been identified as another significant difficulty for mothers (Bay, 1999; Cantwell and Mulhearn, 1997; Edwards, 1993; Lidgard, 2004).

Financial concerns. This theme emerged as participants have explicitly shared that they encounter financial instability, especially that aside from the tuition fee they need to pay, they also have other financial obligations. Also, they dramatically expressed that they only get financial support from their husbands, whom they also consider as their primary source of strength and encouragement.

Kung student ka and mother ka, grabe ka lisud. Labi na kungbago pa kang anak. Labi na kung exam kay tingbayad pud unya maka ingon ko nga panggatas man jud ni sa akong anak ba. (If you are a student and a mother at the same time, it is very difficult especially during examination since you need to pay the tuition, you would think that the tuition fee could have been used to buy milk for your child.) RQ1 P1 P5

Dili pud baya siya kanang tagabulan jud gud magpadala so isa pud sa akuang mga challenges is ng financial. Ilabi na ang pangkonsumo ninyo. (One of my challenges is financial, specifically for our daily expenses and consumption.) RQ1 MQ1 P5

This result is in accordance with the study of Behlol and Ifran (2016) that the support for the education of married women depends upon family attitude, educational status, financial stability, and husband viewpoint. Having people who positively supported them in lifelong learning, including extended family members, friends, and partners, seems vital in how well mothers cope with these experiences (Bay, 1999; Kantanis, 2002; Griffiths, 2002).

Negative Criticisms from People. It flourished as the participants recalled some experiences with people who learned about their situation. The participants, being individuals living in urban areas, were not exempted from the people's judgment around them. Specifically, they shared that even their relatives are the primary persons who doubted their capabilities to achieve their dreams, given that they are student-mothers.

Muingon sila na nganong muskwela pa man ka na ingon ana na man imong edad? Nganong muskwela pa man ka na dagko na man na imong mga anak. (People comment and ask why I went back to school, my kids are all big enough.) RQ1 PQ1 P2

Naa pajud mga tao na muingon nga "unsa na diay ka nga year?" unya murag ma pressure ka lami kayo ingnon na kamo daw skwelag education kung lalim ba. Unya dili raba jud siya lalim na nagskwela ka naa na kay anak (Other people would ask, "What year are you?" Then it pressures me. Would even want to tell them that schooling is not that easy as they think. Moreso, that I have a child.) RQ1 PQ1 P3

Motherhood responsibilities. This flourished as the dominantly felt struggle among the participants. With strong emotions, one of the participants expressed how difficult it was for her to fulfill the duties of being a mother and at the same time do her school works without a husband beside her. She expressed:

... nabuntis ko but wala gud siya pero ato na time pagkabuntis nako is nibalik na gud ko ug skwela diria so mao to ang pinakadako na challenge na kanang murag Nawala ko gamay sa path nako para sa college. (I got pregnant but my partner was not beside me. It was a great challenge on my part which caused me to lose focus on my studies.) RQ1 MQ1 P1

Specifically, Participant 2 emphasized the following struggles she encountered as a student mother:

So mao to siya ahmm ang challenges ato kay kianhanglan jud nako maningkamot para sa akong mga anak. Bisag unsa ka lisud, naa ng mga financial problem, naa ng family matters kung unsaon paglook after sa mga kids although kinahanglan kayanon para makatungtong ka ug skwela para makapangita kag nindot na trabaho. (So the challenges include the need for me to strive hard for my children. No matter how hard it is, including financial problems, family matters first. It is very difficult but you need to pursue schooling no matter what so you can end up with a good job in the future.) RQ1 P2

The experienced problems, as stated in the study of Kazemi, Ghaedrahmati, Kheirabadi, Ebrahimi, and Bahrami (2018), included socioeconomic issues as well as pregnancy and delivery problems. Unfulfilled expectations. The unfulfilled expectations formed conditions and reactions women expected during interactions with others, such as social support and marital relationships. Further, psychological distress is women's reaction to pregnancy-related events and relative interactions, including psychological reactions and inefficiency in playing roles and fulfilling responsibilities.

Health concerns also flourished as a theme from the challenges encountered by the student mothers. They shared that:

Akua kay kanang nabughat ko, kana jud. Usahay kanang sakit akong ulo kay kulang ko ug tulog maka apekto jud na sa akua. Usahay muadto ko ug skwelahan unya wala ko sa akong kaugalingon. Unya kanang hago na gud unya ipush jud nimo imong self ba. (For me, at times, when I am doing something, I feel dizzy and my head aches due to lack of sleep. Sometimes I go to school without focus because I am so tired already.) RQ1 PQ1 P7

Isa pud kay ang akuang health kay dali ra jud kayo ko ma kanang gung hina akuang immune system. (One of my struggles is my health condition. I feel like my immune system is weak.) RQ1 P3

Most of them experience some postpartum illnesses like a severe headache which was pointed out by Ayoub (2014) to be a normal health experience among mothers who just had a baby born. Also, the pressure from fulfilling their motherhood duties is that the participants become very weary. This manifests how difficult their struggles are that they do not mind nor listen to their bodies when they feel sick because they think of the other more important things that they need to attend to.

The last theme on the challenges encountered is the *intellectual challenges*. The student mothers think that they are way too old compared to the regular students or their classmates. Further, they also emphasize:

So ang mga challenges na akuang na kuanan pagskwela nako is kanang syempre dugay na ka naka skwela ba unya nay mga lessons na kanang murag makalimot na ka. Unya mao to na ana si sir kanang sa math sauna na nahuman na man ni nakalimot na ka. (So the challenges I encounter as I continue my studies include difficulty in comprehending with the lessons especially that I have forgot most of the lessons because I encountered them a long time ago.) RQ1P3

Basically sa academics kay murag mangapa ka kay murag back to zero ka ba. (Basically, as to my academics, I struggle much as it feels like I am starting all over again.) RQ1 P4

These challenges reflect how the student-mothers hurdle is to be abreast with their lessons and connect with their young classmates. Given as a struggle, this experience among the participants can further be explained by the proposition of Lynch (2008) that combining motherhood and studying without compromising the activities of either one is a great dilemma for student mothers. When a woman must focus on her studies, her behavior may contrast with her traditional motherhood role.

Hopes and Aspirations of the Student Mothers

To complete their degree. This is the first identified theme for the hopes and aspirations of the participants. The student mothers were very expressive of their gratitude towards their partners and parents. The participants are very determined to

finish their studies as they take their families as their motivation and very reason to complete their degrees. These are evident in the following responses:

Nagahope man jud ta mahuman no unya gusto man jud nato na lisensyado gud ta. (I am hoping that I could really become a registered teacher.)^{RQ3MQ3P6}

Mamotivate nalang pud ta mahuman kay dili nalang man kita atong ginahunahuna kay ang atuang anak ba. (I am motivated enough to finish my degree not just for myself but most especially for my child.)
RQ3MQ3P4

The firm determination to succeed in school can further be supported by the idea of Bloom (2005) which emphasizes the notion that self-determination and self-drive are all it takes to achieve our desires. No matter how difficult the process will be, still in the end, you will reap the fruits of your sacrifices.

To land a job for a better life. This theme emerged as most of the participants really would want to give back to their parents, all the sacrifices. Also, they are aspiring to live a better life with their growing families. They believe that they can only make this into reality when they can land a job to help sustain their needs, especially financial needs. The responses of the participants are as follows:

Unya dili lang man gud karon ang dapat hunahunaon dapat hunahunaon ang future nga nay maayong trabaho. (We should not just think about today but most especially think about the future where we could land a good job.)^{RQ3MQ3P2}

Makatabaho ug para pud ni makatabang ta sa atong mga ginikanan. (To work and to help the family especially our parents)^{RQ3MQ3P3}

The strong motivation of the participants to achieve their aspirations agrees with the Hawthorne Effect theory of Landsberger (1958), which points out that, when one person has a stout determination to fulfill his/her desires, it will serve as his/her drive to really work on it and later on achieve it.

To make the family proud. This is the last theme that emerged for the hopes and aspirations. When the participants shared their thoughts on this, they were very emotional. It reminds the sacrifices of their parents and even their husbands, who have been very supportive of their academic endeavors. This was evident in the following responses:

Ug kanang gusto pud gud ka maapil sa ikapahambog sa imong parents. (You have that desire to the pride of your parents.)^{RQ3MQ3P6}

Unya dapat pud as a wife mag aim jud ka ug degree para ma proud pud imong bana. (As a wife, one must aim high so that the husband will be proud)^{RQ3MQ3P7}

These serve as their motivation to really hurdle their education and achieve their degree to at least take pride in accomplishing a degree even after married life.

Coping Mechanism of the Student Mothers

Coping mechanisms are the strategies people often use in the face of stress and/or trauma to help manage painful or difficult emotions. Coping mechanisms can help people adjust to stressful events while assisting them in maintaining their emotional well-being (Good Therapy, 2019). When the participants were asked about this, their responses resembled who they consider as their support system. The following themes emerged: Strengthening family bonds, Self-motivation, and support from family, friends, and teachers.

Strengthening family bond. These participants have also pointed out that they are lucky to know that their partners are also very cool whenever they are down, for they would always bring smiles on their faces. Further, the presence of their partners and the memories they make together with their children lighten up their mood, especially when the student-mothers feel much burdened with a lot of works to do in school and even at home. That is why; having a family to bond and make memories with is beneficial for them to cope with their struggles.

Self-Motivation. Two of the participants expressed their strong motivation to really encourage themselves to continue no matter what. They said:

Sa akua kay akong mga gusto jud nako sa kinabuhì. Ako man gud ang tao na mag plan ahead ko ba. Kanang naa koy goal sa kinabuhì. (For me, my desires in life, I plan ahead especially with my goals in life.) RQ2 MQ1 P2

Akua pud kay akua lang ingun akua sarili na go lang unya naa man jud koy habit na magbasa jud ko ug libro. (I just remind myself to push forward. Also, I am fond of reading.) RQ2 MQ1

In view thereof, the idea of Good Therapy (2019) about coping mechanisms is indeed accurate. Psychological stress can be caused by significant life experiences, whether positive or unpleasant. Divorce, miscarriage, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a career are all difficult occurrences that can bring grief or distress in most people. Even events that many people regard to be positive, such as getting married, having a kid, and purchasing a home, can cause tremendous stress.

Support from family, friends, and teachers. In this theme, the participants were also very emotional in sharing how lucky they are that they have very supportive family members and considerate teachers and friends who lend a hand in different ways. The participants shared that:

Ang akuang bana kay grabe jud siya ka supportive. Unya ang akong anak pud kanang taas gud kaayo ka ug pangarap sa iya as ginikanan. (My husband is very supportive. Then as a parent, I have lots of dreams for my child.) RQ2 MQ1 P1

Pero thankful ko kay supportive kayo si Mama. Although at first naay disappointment pero pagbalik nako ug eskwela kay nalipay sila. So gimanange nako siya pina agi sa tabang sa akong family. (But, I am so thankful for my mother is very supportive even it there were disappointments, still they helped me and they were even happy that I decide to continue my education. I was able to manage through the help of my family.) RQ2 MQ1 P1

The participants have also reiterated how thankful they are that teachers are also very considerate to them in school. They appreciate it significantly because, without their imparted knowledge, it would have been more difficult for them to cope with their school lessons whenever the student mothers are absent due to motherhood responsibilities.

IV. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings

On the first question about the struggles and journey of student mothers, six (6) themes flourished, namely: time management, financial concerns, and negative criticisms from people, motherhood responsibilities, health concerns, and intellectual challenges.

The second question focuses on the hopes and aspirations of student mothers. Three (3) themes emerged, specifically: to complete their degree, land a job for a better life, and make the family proud.

The third question centered on student mothers' coping mechanisms, three (3) themes flourished: strengthening family bond, self-motivation, and support from family, friends, and teachers.

It can be pointed out that the experiences of the student-mothers were explained by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1992) which is divided into five different systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. In particular, family, friends, and teachers emerged to support the student-mothers. These people have direct contact with the student-mothers in their immediate environment, which falls under the microsystem level.

Implications

The shared experiences of the student-mothers in this paper are only just a few of the real-life scenarios that transpired in their continuous quest to achieve their aspirations. The family members, being the sources of strength of the student-mothers, are also sometimes the source of stress. Yet, as emphasized by the participants, they are also the people who are

always there through thick and thin. The student-mothers are very hopeful that they will really savor victory in time. As they look forward to the day they will graduate, they promise themselves that their aspirations of achieving a better life will really become a reality. The trials that they are facing right now are mere spices to what they call the life of a student-mother. That being said, positivism is dominantly felt by all of the participants.

The success of student mothers shall shed light on the dark imaginings of those who think negatively about them. Specifically, the result of this study may pave the way to encourage other mothers to continue their incomplete education even if they already have children or families of their own. To mention, in UM Peñaplata College, several students conceive babies while they are still studying; thus, this study will give them the motivation to push and work harder for still, victory await for those who sacrifice and persevere.

In the field of education, the results of this study may contribute to producing hardworking teachers because their experiences may serve as their vital source of motivation to give their best in the field of their practice as soon-to-be educators.

Future Directions

The school administration and faculty should be more vigilant in formulating and revising current school policies for the unwed or married students to accommodate them at their convenient time.

The students should aspire higher in life and become motivated to continue their studies despite challenges in life.

The research institutions should consider the issues and concerns associated with student-mothers to be part of the vital area for research and related endeavors as this may help improve the research agenda of different research institutions.

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