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Research Article

Academic Challenges and Coping Mechanisms among Senior High School Students with Overseas Filipino Worker Parents

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ABSTRACT

Students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents face a wide array of challenges that affect their well-being. The consequences of parent's absence directly affect their child's psychological state which can result to poor academic performance. This study aimed to determine the academic challenges and coping mechanisms of the Senior High School students with Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) parents through analysis of their lived experience. This study employed a phenomenological research design. In this study a purposive sampling technique was employed to select the six (6) respondents with OFW parents in Senior High School. These students were selected using the following criteria: (1) a senior high school student at Tairan National High School; (2) whose mother is working abroad; and (3) willingness of the respondents to participate in the study. The data collected from the interview were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three (3) subthemes emerged in the senior high school students' academic challenges: (1) school-related problem; (2) lack of parent's attention and guidance; and (3) communication. On the other hand, the coping mechanisms of the students include (1) reciprocating parent's efforts; (2) understanding the parents' reasons for working abroad; (3) building a circle of friends and family support system. Results showed that the parents' absence affects the academic performances of the students. However, the students displayed strong commitment to do well in school to reciprocate parents' sacrifices. Thus, this phenomenological study establishes the baseline in developing programs and support system to the students with OFW parents.

Keywords: *Academic challenges, Coping mechanism, Lived experience, Overseas Filipino Worker, Parental absence, Senior high school*

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Introduction

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) are recognized by the Philippine Government as the “modern day heroes” for their selfless sacrifices and contributions to the country’s economy through their remittances. There are numerous reasons why migrant workers prefer to work overseas and among these is to have gainful employment (Abenir, 2020). Many OFWs opted to work abroad for greener pasture and to provide better opportunities for their families left behind in the Philippines. Some of the migrant workers decided to work abroad because there are no job opportunities here. Each year migrant workers are increasing due to the demand of work forces in other countries. Additionally, higher salaries are offered to migrant workers which motivates them to take chances abroad. “Migration is likely to have an impact on the overall household welfare” (Ducanes, 2015, as cited in Burgos et al., 2020, p.6). Similarly, Battistella and Conaco (1998) argue that the education of the children of OFW maybe affected by migration due to parental absence.

The Philippines is considered one of the largest producing migrant workers across the globe. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) survey in year 2021, there are about 1.83 million OFW who are working offshore from April to September 2021. About 60.2 percent or 1.10 million of these OFWs are women and were engaged in elementary occupation. Moreover, across the Philippine archipelago, 64.70 percent OFWs were from Luzon, followed by Mindanao at 18.4 percent and Visayas at 16.9 percent. In the 2021 PSA survey, BARMM has around 2 percent OFW.

Family is considered as the basic unit of society, and it serves a huge role in molding young minds. However, when one or both parents decide to work abroad the family dynamic changes. Oftentimes, children of the OFW parents are left behind under the care and supervision of grandparents, uncles, aunties, or closest kin. “Relatives who serve as guardians of the children are the one making them feel love and feel that they are not alone” (Burgos et al., 2020, p. 10). Battistella and Conaco (1998) pointed out that “children of migrants tend to present problematic aspect, both in terms of school achievements and social adjustment” (p.

237). The researchers also argue that children are less likely to suffer from parental absence “if the mother remains in the house” (p. 237). On the other hand, Abenir (2019) highlighted that whether the children left behind are male or female, the children do not feel comfortable when it is their mother who work abroad.

Studies have shown that migration impact the general well-being of the children left behind. Looking at a positive perspective, migrant parents are able to provide for financial support to their loved ones which enable them to access better education, acquire properties, buy nutritious food and get better health care. Although working abroad gives a financial security blanket to the families left behind, the physical absence of the migrant parents has an adverse effect on the emotional well-being and social development of the children (Burgos et al., 2020).

Children left behind usually suffer from extreme loneliness and longingness. Calantas and Lobaton (2018) pointed out that teenagers with OFW parents may exhibit a tendency towards rebellious behaviour and experience feelings of envy to other cohort with complete family. Aguilar (2020) found that the left behind children of OFW struggled in handling problems at home and in school and even in dealing with their personal lives. Likewise, Givaudan and Pick (2013) as cited in Calantas and Lobaton (2018) reported that children of migrant workers “have more behavioural problems such as dropping out of school, engaging in vices, and drug abuse” (p.253).

Battistella and Conaco (1998) found that children’s school performance is also impacted by migration. McKenzie and Rapoport (2006) argued that male and female students living in a migrant household have a lower chance of completing high school. With the absence of the parents, children left behind encountered difficulties in doing their homework. Children underscored that whenever they have problems with teachers, classmates, and at home, they do not have someone to talk to. Moreover, children left behind with mother migrant worker have the tendency to perform “least well in school” as compared to other parent-absent group (Battistella & Conaco, 1998, p. 232). Additionally, Jovero (2021) claimed that students were

struggling in their academic performances without the presence of their mother. Gonzales et al. (2019) found that adolescent with OFW parents exhibited poor academic performance and higher level of anxiety and depression than those with non-migrant parents. In contrast, Arlan et al. (2008) found that migration of parents does not affect academic performance of their children. Similarly, Aquino (2019) reported that students with OFW parents perform very satisfactorily and are not affected by their parent's absence.

In the migrant parents' absence, children left behind are cared and loved for by the closest relatives. Guardians who take care the children of migrant workers fill in the gaps and duties of the parents on their behalf. Children left behind get their social support from their grandparents, uncles and aunties, and extended families (Burgos et al., 2020). Oftentimes, the eldest child in the family is given the responsibility to take care of their siblings, even with the presence of their father, which is one of the difficult challenges they faced (Aguilar, 2020). Calantas and Lobaton (2018) argue that relatives "cannot provide the same love, affection and support as that of the parents" (p. 235). Moreover, Burgos et al. (2020) emphasized that even though children left behind have someone by their side "they still tend to seek their parents' presence and love" (p.10).

On the other hand, children of migrant parents considered their circle of friends as "baggage counter" (Calantas & Lobaton, 2018, p. 253). Whenever children have problems at home and school which they cannot tell directly to their parents, they openly share it to their peers. Having a circle of friends as support system can lessen the problems being faced by the children with OFW parents and is considered one of the common coping mechanisms. Almeda-Luzano and Dela Cruz (2018) and Mendoza and Cruz (2020) emphasized the importance of social support system to help students with OFW parents adjust to the situation they are in.

Given that migrant parents and children left behind are far away from each other, technology, together with social media can help connect and communicate transnationally (Abenir, 2019). The presence of internet connectivity

and the availability of the social media has a significant role in terms of communication and easy access to information that could help the students and their mother who were working abroad for their connection and interaction (Jovero, 2021). Burgos et al. (2020) and Abenir (2019) mentioned that communication between the migrant parents and their children is essential and should be maintained to ensure that children will feel their love and presence not just through the remittances and material presents they received. Burgos et al. (2020) recommended that migrant parents should make themselves available and be willing to lend an ear to their children to foster a positive relationship.

The impact of migration on the children left behind is less examined and most studies are said to be "impressionistic" (Battistella & Conaco, 1998). Literature revealed numerous studies examining the impact of migration on academic performance focus on elementary level. Additionally, there is a limited study that examine the lived experiences of senior high school students with parents working overseas, specifically in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). In the preliminary investigation conducted by the researchers within the locality, most of the children left behind with OFW parents display behavioral problems and lower academic performance. In Tairan National High School, records show that there is a relatively high number of Junior High School students with OFW parents. However, these numbers deplete in the Senior High School. This urged the researchers to conduct an in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of the students with OFW parents and determine the struggles directly affecting academic performance. The purpose of the study is to explore the lived experiences of the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker parents. Specifically, the researchers of the present study are interested to determine the academic challenges and coping mechanisms of the senior high school students with mother migrant workers.

Methods

This qualitative study made use of phenomenological research design to determine and

explore the lived experiences of the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. In this study, the academic challenges of the students of having migrant parents were uncovered and their coping mechanisms were identified. According to Cresswell (2009) a phenomenological approach enables to deeply examine and describe the human experience in a particular phenomenon.

Six (6) senior high school students enrolled in the school year 2022-2023 at Tairan National High School were purposively chosen to be the respondents for this study. Cresswell (2009) pointed out that “three to ten” respondents are sufficient in carrying out a phenomenological research study. Of these six respondents who willingly participated in the study, four (4) were males and two (2) were females whose ages range from 17 to 20. In addition, all respondents have their mother parent working abroad, specifically in the Middle East, since they were in elementary.

The researchers developed a semi-structured interview questionnaire, and which was validated by the research advisor. Prior to the conduct of the study, the researchers pilot tested the interview questionnaire to a small group of junior high school students to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the research instrument. After the pilot testing, minor adjustments were made to the interview questionnaire to improve the clarity and relevance. This is to ensure that the set of questionnaires capture the lived experiences of the students with OFW parents. The final version of the interview questionnaire was used to elicit the lived experiences and examine the academic challenges and coping mechanisms of the students with OFW parents.

On the other hand, the researchers identified the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. At the same time, the researchers secured all the pertinent documents needed to implement the study which included the informed consent and permit to conduct the study from the office of the School Head. The researchers carried out the one-on-one interview based on the respondent's free time after school. The

respondents were free to express their thoughts and feelings using English or Filipino languages or use their own dialect. Senior high school students were encouraged to share their personal experiences freely and honestly. This allowed the researchers to uncover rich insights about the academic challenges and coping mechanisms of the senior high students with OFW. During the interview, the researchers recorded the whole interview. After conducting the interview, the researchers compiled and coded the responses of the students. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the different themes and subthemes based on the results of the interview. The researchers included the responses of the students in verbatim and did not translate it to ensure that the views and ideas were preserved.

The researchers strictly followed the ethical guidelines in conducting this phenomenological study. The researchers secured documents and approval of the authorities for the implementation of this study. Similarly, the researchers made sure that the identity of the respondents and their answers to the interview were kept confidentially and will be used for the purpose of this study.

Result and Discussion

The senior high school students were interviewed to determine their lived experiences of having Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. All the mothers of the senior high school students have been working abroad ever since their son's or daughter's elementary days. The respondents' responses were grouped according to the two major themes: (1) academic challenges of the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents and (2) the coping mechanisms of the students to overcome the challenges they are facing.

Theme 1. Academic challenges of Senior High School students with OFW parents

In this study, the researchers found the challenges of students with OFW parents and was divided into the following subthemes: (1) School-related problems; (2) Lack of parents' attention and guidance; and (3) Communication.

Subtheme 1. School-related Problems

One of the challenges that most senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents mentioned is the school-related problem. According to the respondents, they were challenged by their parents' absence since they do not have someone to guide them whenever they need help in doing school-related assignments and activities. Given that their mothers are not with them, they seek assistance from their relatives to guide them in doing their schoolwork. The respondents stated:

"Challenge para sa akin ang mga assignments or aralin, kailangan ko din ng gabay at tulong ng magulang na gagawa sakin, ngunit wala man dito sila so kailangan ko pang pumunta sa ibang pamilya ko para humingi ng tulong" [R3]

"Yung paggawa ng projects especially yung thesis, na cha-challenge ako sa pagkat walang tumutulong or nag-guguide sa akin na magulang" [R4].

The researchers also asked the students if their parent's absence has impact on their academic performance. Based on the interview, the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents believed their parents' absence affects their academic performance. Here are some of the responses of the respondents:

"Oo, for example yung mga may kailangan ako or nahihirapan akong mga aralin so kailangan ko pang pumunta sa ibang pamilya ko para humingi ng tulong sa kanila" [R3].

"Oo, kasi wala akong mapagsabihan ng problema ko particularly sa eskuwelahan" [R6].

"Oo, dahil ang pagkawala ng magulang ay kahinaan ko dahil wala akong mapagsabihan ng aking mga problema especially sa school" [R5].

This shows that most of the senior high school students with OFW parents struggled in terms of their academic performances in school

because they do not have someone to guide them in their study in which similar needs cannot be fully given by relatives taking care of them here in the Philippines as compared to their parents who are physically present with them. Students also expressed their sentiments, especially when they have problems in school because they do not have someone to tell it. Moreover, students pointed out that they still need their mother's guidance in order for them to do well in school. Furthermore, senior high school students admitted that even though they are already adolescents they need same attention as those children with OFW parents. These findings suggest that parental migration negatively affects student's academic performance. Students are affected by their mother's absence even though their closest kins are with them. These findings coincided with Battistella and Conaco (1998), Arguillas and Williams (2010), Gonzales et al. (2019), and Jovero (2021) that students with OFW parents struggle in school especially when the mother is the one working overseas.

Subtheme 2. Lack of parent's attention and guidance

The senior high school students underscored that they long for their parent's attention and guidance. Most of them are under the care of their father and other relatives. Here are some of the responses of the students during the interview.

"For me I think yung mga challenges na naranasan ko is yung kakulangan sa attention ng magulang ng isang ina kasi mostly yung nakatutok lang sakin ng attention is yung father ko kasi siya lang lahat ang gumagawa" [R1].

"Nag susuffer ako sa emotional halimbawa yung sinasarili ko ang mga problems ko sa eskuwelahan" [R5].

"Tulad nga ng wala akong mapagsabihan ng problema at mapaghingan ng advice" [R6].

Even at this stage, most of the senior high school students admitted longing for their

mother's attention and guidance. Students also claimed that they struggled emotionally because they try to handle problems on their own, and most of the time, they do not have someone to seek for advice and help whenever they encounter problems in school and at home. Students expressed that they are comfortable sharing their problems and seeking advice from their mother. These findings imply that mother's guidance is important specially in adolescent stage. Senior high school students need utmost parental guidance since they are in the transition period from adolescent to young adult where they become more independent and are able to decide on their own. Thus, the lack of parental guidance not only affect student's psychological well-being but also their academic performance.

Subtheme 3. Communication

Communication proves to be a significant challenge for the senior high school students with Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. Most of the time, students want to talk to their mother to know about their status abroad and to also share moments with them virtually. However, poor internet connectivity in the community hinders smooth communication between the students and their mothers. One student articulated the challenge:

"Challenge sakin yung kawalan ng Internet Connection kasi di ko siya always ma-reach out if may kailangan ako, at hamon din sakin na masanay mag-isa. Although di naman nag iisa, pero mahirap nasa malayo ang magulang kasi di mo alam kung ano nangyayari sa kanya kung okay lang ba siya" [R2].

With the presence of the social media, communication between the student and their OFW parents become accessible. However, poor internet connectivity in locality limits students to consistently get in touch with their mother. Despite of this challenge, students find time to communicate with their parents when the internet signal is stable. This shows that students value positive and open communication with their mothers working abroad. Mendoza and Cruz (2020) pointed out that good

communication enable students with OFW parents to be resilient. Additionally, Burgos et al. (2020) and Abenir (2019) highlighted that OFW parents should maintain communication with their children to let them feel the love and presence.

Overall, most of the students claimed that they struggled to do school-related works since they do not have someone to guide them. Also, students shared that communicating with their parents is a challenge for them since they do not usually have time to talk to one another whenever they feel they need someone to talk to. The unstable internet connection in the community is also another problem. Students wanted to communicate with their parents regularly to know how they are doing abroad and to also feel their presence even when they are miles away from each other. Moreover, the students expressed their sentiments about the lack of parental guidance which they feel at this stage of their life is a must. These findings coincided with Calantas and Lobaton (2018), Aguilar (2020), Burgos et al. (2020), Mendoza and Cruz (2020), Distor et al. (2021), Jovero (2021), and Chua et al. (2022).

Theme 2. Coping Mechanism

In this study, the researchers found different coping mechanisms of the senior high school students with OFW parents on how they overcome all the academic challenges they are facing while their parents are away from them. The coping mechanisms are presented into the following subthemes: (1) Reciprocate parent's efforts through good academic performance; (2) Understanding the parents' reasons for working abroad; (3) building a circle of friends and family support system.

Subtheme 1. Prioritize study in order to reciprocate parent's efforts

Even though the senior high school students experienced school-related problems, they strongly expressed that they value their parent's efforts and sacrifices abroad. Students stated the importance of studying well despite of the academic challenges they face in order to reciprocate their parent's efforts through good academic performance. Here are some of the statements of the students:

"For me is sine-set aside ko nalang ang mga challenges na ito kasi alam ko naman na ano ang dahilan ng aking magulang para mag abroad, kaya binibigyan ko na lang ng halaga ang aking academic performance and ginagawa ko nalang ng paraan kung paano ba ako makitungo as a student" [R1].

"...the reason why I keep on studying well, to achieve my goals in life as a student's so I'm doing my very best para masuklian ang mga pagod nila at hirap sa ibang bansa"[R1].

" Para naman maipakita ko sa aking magulang na hindi nila sinasayang ang dugo at pawis nila sa ibang bansa at ang suporta na ibinibigay nila para sa akin" [R2].

"Para matumbasan ang paghihirap nila sa ibang bansa"[R4].

Generally, most of the senior high school students expressed that they always strive to do their best to make their mother and family proud through their academic performance. Students' commitment to reciprocate parent's efforts and sacrifices abroad by getting good grades is a manifestation of their drive to accomplish their goals in life and pursue the dreams their parents have for them. Students are motivated to maintain good academic standing in school not to please their parents but to reciprocate their sacrifices. Gonzales et al. (2019) pointed out that students with OFW parents focus on maintaining good academic performance. However, these findings are inconsistent with Lu et al. (2015) as cited in Burgos et al. (2020) who pointed out that students with migrant parents put greater emphasis on social recognition.

Subtheme 2. Understanding the parent's reasons why they need to work abroad

Senior high school students are grateful for all the sacrifices their mothers make to support their needs in school and at home. Additionally, students recognize the reasons why their

mothers have to leave them behind. Here are some of the accounts of the students:

"They left us behind but for our good naman they work in other country para masustentuhan ang mga pangangailangan ko sa school..." [R1]

"Nakayanan ko ang mga hamong ito sa pamamagitan ng pag-aaral ko ng mabuti dahil dito nalang masusuklian yung paghihirap ng aking magulang kasi yun nga ang dahilan kung bakit sila nagibang bansa para mag trabaho" [R2]

As mentioned by Burgos et al. (2020), students at this stage have already understood and accepted the dynamics of being part of a migrant household. The senior high school students know that their mothers are working abroad to provide better life and education.

Subtheme 3. Building a circle of friends and family support system

Based on the interview the researchers asked if who guides and supports them in their studies in the absence of their OFW parents. All the students said that their families and relatives who are with them at home are the ones supporting them.

Here are the following responses:

"I have this what we call adopted parents, when I was young, mga ten (10) months old pa ako, andun nako sa kanila pero still sinusuportahan din naman ako ng biological parents ko..." [R1].

"For now, yung sumusuporta sa pag-aaral ko is yung family ko" [R2]

" Lola ko, Uncle, Aunty basta lahat ng pamilya ko gumagabay"[R3].

"Yung Lolo ko, Aunty and yung mga relatives ko" [R4].

"Yung side ng Nanay ko " Tita ko"[R5].

"Kapatid, Lola at ibang relatives ko" [R6].

In addition, the senior high school students also draw their support from their peers. According to them, their friends are their companions who actively listen to their problems. One of the students shared:

"Wala pa chill chill lang ako at kapag kasama ko naman ang mga tropa ko nakakalimutan ko ang mga problems ko particularly sa Eskuwelahan" [R4].

Evidently, most of the students get their support from their friends, family and relatives who are with them here in the Philippines. Students with OFW parents are resilient and able to face challenges in life with the guidance of their relatives who are taking care of them. These findings coincided with the study of Calantas and Lobaton (2018) and Aguilar (2020). Almeda-Luzano and Dela Cruz (2018) underscored that social support from relatives and friends are significant to help students cope with the struggles of not having their mothers beside them. Similarly, Mendoza and Cruz (2020) strongly suggest that students must have social support networks to lessen the stressors caused by parental migration.

The researchers also asked the senior high school students how their mothers support them while they are away from them. Accordingly, Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents, specifically their mothers showed their support in two ways: financially and morally.

Here are some of the responses of the students how their parents showed their support:

"Kapag may mga projects, nagpapadala sakin ng financial dito upang makabili ng gamit para sa mga projects" [R3].

"Bang unu awun bayaran ha school or kailangan mag iyan lang ako kaniya idihil da nila" [R4].

"Sa pamamagitan ng pagbibigay ng financial at nag sasakripisiyo sa ibang bansa" [R5].

"They are guiding me, for example when I was stress in school so they just keep telling me na "Anak pahinga ka

muna wag masyadong pagurin ang katawanan may oras pa naman" and in every circumstance na na-face ko is lagi naman silang nandyan and sinusuportahan ako" [R1].

Clearly, even though their parents are away from their children they still show their support in terms of financial support and moral support.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The challenges of senior high school students with OFW parents affecting their academic performance include (a) school-related problems, (b) lack of parent's attention and guidance, and (c) communication.
2. With their mother's absence, students cope with these challenges by (a) showing positive attitude to reciprocate their parent's sacrifices by doing well in school; (b) understanding the reasons for their parents working abroad; and (c) building a circle of friends and support system within their family and relatives. Furthermore, despite their physical absence, OFW parents provide support to their children through financial aid and moral support in every endeavor their sons and daughters undertake.

Recommendations

This study uncovered the academic challenges and coping mechanism of the senior high school students with OFW parents. The researchers recognized the limitation of the current study specifically the influence of parental migration on the academic performance in relation to the grades of the students. Hence, the following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. Future researchers should consider the grades of the senior high school students to determine the actual academic performance and magnitude of the impact of parental migration.
2. School including the teachers should provide support system for students with OFW parents.

3. The guidance counselor of the school should give orientation to students with OFW parents to educate them about their roles and offer insights into reciprocating their parent's efforts.
4. Parents or relatives who are taking care of the students should monitor them regularly both their involvement in academic and non-academic activities in schools.

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