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Research Article

Senior High School Student-Mothers in the New Normal: Understanding their Lived Experiences on Modular Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Balancing motherhood and academic life are a difficult task - being a mother is a demanding role, and being a student is also demanding. With the advent of the new learning modality, specifically modular distance learning, SHS student-mothers face a whole new circumstance in addition to their existing dual roles. This phenomenological research explored the lived experiences of five senior high school student mothers in the modular distance learning. Participants met the inclusion criteria of a student mother, which includes (1) a student-mother under the General Academic Strand in a Public Stand-alone Senior High School of the School of the Schools Division of the City of Batac; (2) a working student mother and living with her child; and (3) willingness to participate in the study. Four major themes emerged in the participants' lived experiences, which include (1) struggles with dual roles, (2) learning challenges, (3) realizations, and (4) a strong support system. The findings revealed that the participants faced adversities and struggles as mothers and students and remained more steadfast and resilient in fulfilling their dreams of finishing their senior high school and receiving a basic education diploma amid the pandemic. Hence, the lived experiences of student mothers have established baseline data for developing educational programs and guidance services that can meet the needs of student mothers amid the pandemic.

Keywords: *Lived experiences, Modular distance learning, Phenomenology, Senior high school, Student mothers*

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Introduction

Education has been identified as a critical component of development in the Philippines. To realize this first step of the significance of education to the country's call for development, Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan (2007) emphasized that a fair and equitable society requires open access to schooling. Living proof of this realization is the presence of student-mother enrollees in the Senior High School (SHS) of the K-to-12 curriculum of the Department of Education (DepEd). Furthermore, according to Imbong (2009), "education for women remains the most vital tool in promoting equality between men and women and empowering women to contribute fully to society."

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, following the imposition of the government's total lockdown on March 16, 2020, known as Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in the Philippines, all schools were closed to prevent the viral infection from spreading further. This resulted in a significant shift in how education is delivered, affecting the country's step toward development.

DepEd developed the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) framework, which guides how the country delivers education during crises while ensuring learners' and teachers' health, safety, and welfare and DepEd personnel. The BE-LCP permits multiple learning delivery modalities, including modular distance learning (MDL), online distance learning (ODL), TV/Radio-Based Instruction (TV/R), and Blended Learning – a combination of different distance learning modalities. The most common learning modality that provides more flexible and inclusive access to education is the MDL which involves the use of self-learning

modules (SLMs) either in print or digital format/electronic copy and various learning resources like learner's materials, textbooks, activity sheets, worksheets, study guides, and other study materials. SLMs are made available in print and offline/online digital formats to help learners, parents, and teachers adopt these learning delivery modalities successfully. Balancing motherhood and academic life are a difficult task - being a mother is a demanding role, and being a student is also demanding. For

generations, married women who chose to further their education had to balance household responsibilities. When combined with the demands of academic life, this social obligation results in a clash of roles. Being a student and being a mother takes up enormous time. It is challenging to show two faces — that of a mother and that of a student. Nevertheless, schooling is essential in the life of a young woman because the amount of education she receives affects the future aspects of her life. With the advent of the new learning modality, specifically modular distance learning, SHS student-mothers face a whole new circumstance in addition to their existing dual roles. The researchers observed that some of the enrolled student-mothers do not regularly attend school on the designated dates for module retrieval and distribution. Also, they tend to submit subpar outputs and to be unresponsive to class group chats. Additionally, the class advisers of these students revealed to the researchers during the interview that their performance during printed modular distance learning was negatively affected by their responsibilities as working mothers. This notable observation of the researchers affirms the findings of Utami, (2019) that taking on the responsibility of learning while maintaining family obligations is complex, and this decision may have far-reaching consequences. Thus, adding the role of the student can create time and energy conflicts.

Moreover, student mother research in this country has focused on a wide range of topics. These studies examined the shifting social norms to support the higher education of young mothers (Ato, 2018), the challenges of student mothers (Dasig, 2020), the motivation of single mothers to complete tertiary education (Yang & Bullecer, 2016), and the academic journey of student mothers (Torres et al., 2020). Nonetheless, no studies explored the senior high school experiences of studentmothers in the new normal. A risk-taker is a mother who returns to high school to further her education despite assuming the role of the light of their home.

Hence, this study was conducted to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of student mothers in senior high school, how they define

their roles and obligations, and their coping mechanisms to surpass the arduous, challenging, and complicated life of having two faces a student and being a mother.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically the phenomenology design, to investigate the learners' actual experiences with the implementation of printed modular distance learning as a mode of instruction in the new norm. The phenomenological study explores people's perceptions of the world by examining the lived experience of a concept or phenomenon from the perspectives of multiple individuals to interpret the shared meaning (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017). Internal and external factors influence lived experiences, which are the immediate awareness of life's events prior to thought and interpretation. The lived experience gives meaning to everyone's perception of a phenomenon and thus reveals to the individual what is true and real in their lives (Giorgi, 1997). It provides a fundamental shift from a positivist cause-and-effect perspective to one that emphasizes human subjectivity and determining the meaning of actions (Giorgi, 2005). Through this design, a more comprehensive understanding, more realistic knowledge, and insight into of the dual roles of the student-mothers in the new normal.

Participants

The participants of the study were student mothers in the public senior high school. Five (5) students were recruited using the purposive sampling technique. Sampling continued until data were saturated, which in phenomenological studies can range from as few as five participants to up to fifteen (Boyd, 2001). The selection criteria were as follows: (a) student-mothers enrolled in the public stand-alone senior high school under the General Academic Strand of the Schools Division of the City of Batac for the school year 2021-2022; (b) working student mother and living with their child; (c) had the willingness to participate in the study.

For ethical considerations, the researchers obtained permission from the school's principal before conducting the study. Upon approval, an invitation and informed consent

form were distributed to participants indicating their voluntary participation in the study and comprehension of all withdrawal and refusal rights. Consequently, willing participants provided their signed consent. Throughout the research process, privacy and secrecy were maintained. No report of the study included the personal information of the participants. Moreover, all participants were assured that the information they provided would be used solely to achieve the study's objectives.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The researchers adopted the methodology of Natividad et al., (2022), in which they conducted individual, unstructured interviews with the student mothers to collect vital data from them. Interviews are the preferred method of data collection in phenomenological research, according to Marton and Booth (1997), because they provide the flexibility to probe for clarification and collect sufficient detail to develop a detailed description of participant experiences.

With the participants' permission, a cell phone audio recorder was used to ensure validity. It allowed the researcher to refer to the qualitative data collected if any details were missed. As the initial data analysis progressed, researchers called participants to clarify their responses. This procedure ensured that the researcher followed the saturation point theory.

Data Analysis

Following the methodology of Hycner (1985) as adapted by Natividad et al. (2022) for transcription analysis, the collected data were subjected to thematic analysis to arrive at an accurate interpretation. This data analysis method is rigorous and robust, ensuring the veracity and dependability of the results. Components of this procedure include transcription, bracketing, reduction, listening to the interview in its entirety, identifying units of general meaning, identifying another unit of meaning relevant to the research questions, grouping relevant units of meaning, identifying themes from meaning clusters, and contextualizing meaningful themes.

The procedure was carried out by transcribing, coding, categorizing, and thematically analyzing the gathered data.

The interviews were transcribed word-for-word, and the utterances were translated, interpreted, and reviewed to ensure the preservation of their original meaning. Multiple times, the researcher verified the codes, categories, and themes to ensure interpretation consistency.

Result and Discussion

Experiences of Student Mothers on Modular Distance Learning

The student mothers shared their experiences with modular distance learning. Their responses gave rise to the emergence of four major themes: struggles on dual roles, learning challenges, realizations, and a strong support system. In this regard, Table 1 presents the extracted significant statements from the participants, the categories, and the emerged themes.

Table 1. Emerged themes

Extracted Significant Statements	Categories	Emerged Themes
Sometimes it's difficult for me to complete my modules because I also have responsibilities as a mother since my child is too young, so I must ask my husband or other family members to watch our daughter.	Conflict	Struggles on Dual Roles
I have to do more than one thing at a time because I also need time for my daughter. I need to give her a bath, feed her, put her to bed, and bond with her. My child is still 2 years old, which needs more guidance and attention.	Balancing Responsibilities	
As a mother, I feel lucky to have a child, even though I know how hard it is for me to study and care for my child at the same time.		
I do my modules when my child is sleeping or playing.		
When I'm working on all of my modules, I sometimes forget how to start and end them.	Difficulty in accomplishing modules	Learning Challenges
I know that modules are due every Friday, but sometimes I turn them in on a different day. I also don't always turn in my work on the exact deadline for other subjects.	Difficulties with timely module submission	
<i>Iyubrak tay modules ko nu ti kabigatan nan ket pinag-gipasan</i> (The day prior to the deadline, I worked on my modules.)	Internet Connection Difficulties	
<i>Ti problemak ket internet koneksyon. Haan ko mabsa dagitay announcements idiyay GC, ken makasabay kadagitay classmates ko</i> (I have problems with internet connection. Because of this, I seldom read announcements in our Group Chat, thus I cannot keep up with my classmates.)		

Extracted Significant Statements	Categories	Emerged Themes
<p><i>Marigatan nak iti kinaado iti modules mi, haan ko pay nalpas ada manen baro a modules. Isu nu maminsan marigatan nak a mangilippas kadagitay activities (I find it hard having too many modules, there are moments when I have not finished my modules, yet, another new set is there again. So, there are moments where I find it hard to finish all activities.)</i></p>	Complex modular activities	
<p>It's hard to do more than one thing at once. Having a child and going to school at the same time is hard because you can't choose between the two important things. I'm in this situation now, so I can't do anything else. As a mother, I need to find time to do everything I need to do to make sure my daughter is safe during the pandemic, and as a student to, finish all my assignments and study hard.</p>	Multitasking is difficult	
<p>I learned how to be a good person, mother, and student by seeing that many people still loved me and didn't give up on me even after all the bad things I did. I know that if you did something wrong, you shouldn't try it again. Instead, you should move on and do the right thing.</p>	Learning from mistakes	
<p><i>Uray adda anak Kon ket ipagpatuloy ko lattan ti pinagbasak. Inspirasyon ko iti anakko. Kasi adda isu na nga magpalpalakas to loob ko..ken aramidek Amin Amin maprotectorak lang toy anak ko (Even if I do have a child, I will finish my schooling. My child is my inspiration. My child is there to strengthen me, I will do everything to protect my child.)</i></p>	Persevere	Realizations
<p><i>Bilang isang magaaral at isang ina gagawing ko ang lahat para lang maka pagtapos kami ng pagaaral kami ng anak ko (As a student and a mother, I will do everything to finish my schooling, me and my child.)</i></p>	Be Optimistic	
<p>I'm always thinking about my child and my family's future. I've made mistakes, but I trust God and know that I need to face all the problems and look at the bright side. Time moves quickly, so I can't give up and keep looking forward.</p>		
<p>All I want is for my family, friends, and other people close to me to be there for me, cheer me up, and be my inspiration in life.</p>	Presence of Significant People	Strong Support System

Extracted Significant Statements	Categories	Emerged Themes
<p>I'm having trouble getting things done at the same time, so I need my husband and the other people in our house to help me. Being a mother and a student at the same time is hard, so I sometimes ask for help to get everything done.</p> <p>By my child's kisses and hugs</p>		
<p><i>A kas maysa nga ina, nasayaat nu ada financial assistance a maisted kuma iti pamilyak uray bassit a pagkwartaan tapnu haannak marigatan nga agbasa, agubra ken aggaywan.</i> (As a mother, financial support would be helpful so I can study, and instead of working outside, I'll work at home so I can fulfill my duties as a mother and a student.)</p>	Financial Assistance	

Theme 1. Struggles on Dual Roles

These refer to the experiences of student mothers' parents that revolve around their parental roles and their responsibilities as students in the modular learning mode amid the pandemic. The dual roles of student mothers necessitate that they balance their responsibilities to ensure that they continue to fulfill their parental roles while also meeting the academic requirements necessary for distance learning to be successful and perform well academically. As student mothers, they asked their families, especially their husbands, to care for their children while they completed their course-work. Also, some of them mentioned that they

had to employ a strategy by keeping their children occupied with play or allowing them to sleep to complete their assignments. Amid the pandemic, while balancing their responsibilities, they ensure sufficient time to care for their children to remain safe, healthy, and active. However, some of the student mothersemphasized that they have difficulty balancing their dual roles as students and mothers. The fact that their child is still only 2 or 3 years old and therefore requires more attention is one of the participants' difficulties.

In this pandemic, student mothers navigate these dual roles to ensure they meet the Department of Education's minimum learning

competencies while fulfilling their motherly responsibilities, despite the challenges they

face. In addition, performing well in these roles provides comfort and security for their children despite the current difficulties. Marandet and Wainwright (2010) also reported that time and timing were primary concerns of students with dependents. Student mothers must sacrifice one role in order to fulfill another. The findings affirm Adofo (2013) study, who noted that to perform multiple roles appropriately, student mothers in Ghana applied simultaneous management strategies and organization approaches to adapt to contradictions resulting from concurrent tasks. Also, the findings were in line with those of Forster and Offei-Ansah (2012), who determined that giving priority to the family and responsibilities of marital life created problems for doing academic tasks, because the comfort of the family and children was more important than studies for female students.

Theme 2. Learning Challenges

This refers to the difficulties student mothers and fathers face in completing their assigned tasks from their modules at home.

Most of the learner participants' time is spent caring for their children. This circumstance caused the student to be rushed throughout the day and to begin a particular assignment late. As much as the participants would like to remain focused on their modules, they frequently lose track and find themselves

in a rush to complete tasks because most of their time is spent caring for their child. In addition, the burden of receiving at least 8–10 modules in all subjects, with each module containing 5–10 activities, has affected participants' ability to meet deadlines and complete their assignments. This is due to their intermittent internet connection, hindering their access to online learning materials.

Findings indicate that most student parents felt their dual roles were negatively impacted by the lockdown and identified several additional roles that emerged. They emphasized that this experience significantly impacted their parenting role by describing feelings and aspects of limited time, stress and anxiety, and isolation.

Taking on the responsibility of learning while maintaining family obligations is complex, and this decision may have far-reaching consequences. Motherhood already necessitates a substantial amount of time and effort to meet varying obligations; adding the role of the student can create time and energy conflicts (Utami, 2019). A 'time squeeze' to accommodate domestic and academic obligations frequently results in unhappiness and exhaustion (Augustine et al., 2018). In addition, being a mother and a student can lead to financial anxiety (Nikolaeva, 2018), time pressures (Sallee, 2015), role conflict (Home, 1998), and physical or mental pressures (Kreischer, 2017). Additionally, student mothers may experience anger, loneliness, restlessness, and a general lack of time to fulfill both mother and student roles (Taukeni, 2014).

Theme 3. Realizations

Education during the pandemic served as a struggle for students and a realization of resilience and responsibility in learning, which contributed to the development of a better and more refined person. Being a student mother can be a tremendous advantage. It teaches a wide range of applicable skills, such as multitasking, finding boundless patience, and perseverance in facing obstacles. In discussing the coordination and management of their mothering and academic roles, the participants mentioned responsibility, determination, and self-assurance characteristics. In addition, as this

study progressed concerning the student mothers' responses, it became abundantly clear that learning from their mistakes, remaining optimistic, and persevering was among their realizations. The responses of the student mothers implied that having a child while attending school served as their motivation and inspired them to complete their studies. In addition, despite their circumstances, participants were still able to be optimistic; rather than focusing on the negative aspects of life, they focused on the positive outcomes of their sacrifice. Moreover, although they face many obstacles in life, they never give up, and instead of being ashamed of their situation, they use it as motivation to excel in their studies because they want to prove to others that even though they

became parents at a young age, they can still achieve success in the future.

The participants pursued their education despite the obstacles because their children motivated them. They believed that completing their senior year of high school would improve their prospects. According to Lie (2010), individuals' motivations for pursuing something vary. It could be innate or acquired. In this instance, the student-mothers were intrinsically motivated. They chose to continue their professional development because they wanted to demonstrate to their families that they could overcome obstacles. According to Wilsey (2013), this motivation of student-mothers results in their self-fulfillment and goal achievement. Thus, McKeown et al. (2002) were correct when they emphasized that student-mothers view education as essential to achieving their human desires.

Theme 4. Strong Support System

All participants were adamant that receiving support for emotional, financial, maternal, domestic, and educational life facilitated taking on roles and responsibilities. Participants disclosed that their current situation was complicated. However, due to their support from those around them, they can manage their dual roles as students and parents. Participants received various types of support, including moral and financial support from family, friends, and especially the child's father.

In addition, each respondent shared the involvement of other individuals or relatives in their life and child. Due to the respondents' hectic schedules, their children were occasionally left in the care of relatives. Because they are not always with their child, all of the respondents reported feeling disconnected from them. Almost all infants raised in normal conditions develop strong emotional attachments to their caregivers. Psychologists believe that the development of these attachments was as biologically natural as learning to walk and was not merely the result of the parents providing food or warmth. Attachments evolved in humans because they encourage children's desire to remain close to their caregivers and, as a result, to benefit from the learning, security, guidance,

warmth, and affirmation that close relationships provide (Cassidy, 2008). In a study conducted by Naomee (2012), additional family members included grandparents, siblings, and an uncle or aunt. Actually, their roles varied based on their age, relationship, and profession. Those who were students did not spend enough time with the children, so whenever they had free time, they typically played or engaged in other leisure activities with the children. On occasion, they also attempted to impart various lessons to the children. The children were primarily instructed in manners and values by their grandparents. Similarly, Griffiths (2002) agrees that having positive support available, such as extended family members, friends, and partners, appears to be crucial in determining how well mothers cope with these experiences.

Conclusion

There were four significant themes extracted in this research. First struggle on dual roles, balancing their responsibility both as a mother and a learner proved to be a struggle for the participants. When the need to choose arises, they disregard their studies to take care of their child. The responsibility of being a mother outweighs being a learner. Due to struggles with dual roles, the result led to learning challenges such that outputs were rushed or outputs not being submitted on time.

Moreover, the finding indicates that student parents felt negatively impacted by the

lockdowns, this added more roles to fulfill, and different aspects contributed to feeling more stress, anxiety, and isolation. The third theme is realization; despite the struggle to maintain familial obligations and being a mother already a significant obligation, the participants still believe that education would improve their lives, more so that they have a child. Instead of feeling down and being pessimistic, they choose to look at the positive outcomes of their sacrifices. Being a student mother gave them multitasking, patience, and perseverance skills. Their child became their motivation and inspiration in finishing their studies. In addition, the participants need a strong support system, which includes moral and financial support, and with people ready to help them, they believe that they can manage their time both as a mother and a student.

Recommendations

For further research based on this study, the researchers indorse to look for a more specific selection of participants to consider their civil status (married or separated) that may lead to exciting comparison; moreover, a comparison before and after having their child could also be investigated. To provide more context on the support provided by individuals such as parents, friends, classmates, and teachers, they could also be interviewed to corroborate information and dive into how they support a student's mother.

The lived experiences of student mothers have established a baseline for the development of a school that can cater to the needs of student mothers, such as a tutorial program that scaffolds the academic performance of the learner in modular distance learning and skills training in partnership with the TESDA and City Social Welfare so that they can be empowered and become productive mothers as they become entrepreneurs at home while also fulfilling their role as student mothers. Also, the school's Guidance Services should conduct a seminar on time management and developing oneself.

Furthermore, the government, specifically the Department of Social welfare, could develop programs and scholarships for student mothers and conduct a seminar designed for

student mothers about time management, life skills, and psychosocial support.

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