

THE VOICES OF STUDENT-PARENTS

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ABSTRACT: *This study aimed to explore the experiences of students who became parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had posed unique challenges for these student-parents as they navigated the complexities of balancing their roles as students and parents in the midst of unprecedented disruptions. Through qualitative interviews and surveys, this research dealt on the various challenges faced by student-parents, including academic hurdles, time management difficulties, emotional well-being concerns, and the need for social support. The study also investigated the coping strategies employed by student-parents and identified institutional support and policies that could help alleviate their burdens. The findings of this research shed light on the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by student-parents, while providing valuable insights for educational institutions to better understand and address the needs of this vulnerable population. By recognizing and supporting the experiences of student-parents during the pandemic, the researchers can foster an inclusive and supportive academic environment that promotes the student-parents' academic success and overall well-being.*

Keywords: Experiences of student-parent, student-parent

1. INTRODUCTION

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented, affecting every aspect of our existence, including education and family dynamics. As universities and schools transitioned to online education, students confronted unique challenges in adapting to online classes, maintaining academic progress, and juggling personal responsibilities. However, a subset of these students confronted an even more challenging circumstance: becoming parents during the pandemic. According to Cruse et al. [1], student parents are becoming more vulnerable as a result of the pandemic's effects, endangering their capacity to keep their families safe and healthy while at the same time continuing to pursue their education online. The pandemic had imposed additional burdens on student-parents, who had to juggle parenthood, domestic responsibilities, and academic obligations while navigating the uncertainties and disruptions caused by the ongoing crisis. This study seeks to shed light on the experiences of students who assumed parental responsibilities during the pandemic, as well as the various obstacles they faced. The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects on many facets of society, transforming how we live, work, and learn. Students who became parents unexpectedly during this tumultuous period are among those profoundly affected. The convergence of parenthood and academic pursuits presented these individuals with unique challenges and experiences that have not been thoroughly investigated. Parenthood is a life-altering experience that requires adjustments, sacrifices, and the establishment of new routines. Students were abruptly thrust into the dual roles of caregiver and student, navigating uncharted territory with distance learning, social isolation, and ever-changing health and safety protocols. The experiences of students who became parents during the pandemic represent a unique and underrepresented viewpoint that merits consideration and comprehension. Understanding these student-parents' experiences is crucial for multiple reasons. First, it illuminates the unique challenges they encountered, such as balancing academic demands with child care responsibilities. The abrupt transition to distance learning and the closure of childcare facilities exacerbated these obstacles, leaving student-parents with limited resources, increased caregiving responsibilities, and potential academic setbacks. Examining

the experiences of student-parents during the pandemic provides valuable insight into their mental and emotional health. The increased levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation caused by the pandemic had a negative effect on the mental health of a large number of individuals, including The increased levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation caused by the pandemic had a negative effect on the mental health of a large number of individuals, including students' parents. Understanding their emotional struggles and coping mechanisms can facilitate the creation of targeted support systems and resources to alleviate their psychological burdens. In addition, the student-parent experiences during the pandemic have implications for educational institutions. Recognizing and addressing their unique requirements can result in the implementation of policies and practices that promote inclusivity, flexibility, and accessibility in the educational setting. By understanding the obstacles and difficulties encountered by student-parents, institutions can better support their academic pursuits, improve their well-being, and foster an environment that values the diverse experiences of their student body. This study employed qualitative research methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and surveys, in order to investigate the experiences of students who became parents during the pandemic. The study aimed to provide a nuanced comprehension of the joys, struggles, and adaptations of student-parents in the face of unprecedented circumstances by capturing their narratives and perspectives. By examining the experiences of students who became parents during the pandemic, this study hopes to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by filling knowledge voids regarding the unique challenges and resiliency of this population. In the end, the findings of this study can inform the design of targeted support systems, policies, and interventions that promote the success and well-being of student-parents in educational institutions.

2. METHODS

Eleven student parents enrolled in the second semester of SY 2023-2024 were included in the study. These participants have custody of their child or children between the ages of 2 and 6 years old. Prior to the study's initiation, the necessary steps were performed. Requests were made to both the university's Ethics Review Committee (IERC) and the

participants. For data collection and validation, focus groups and individual interviews were utilized. To completely convey the narratives of the participants' experiences during the pandemic, the study employed narrative and descriptive qualitative research methods. This method is founded on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, the philosophical foundation of which is the lived experience of individuals. This qualitative descriptive approach is founded on naturalistic inquiry, which elicits participant experiences in their natural condition. In accordance with the principles of data saturation, open-ended exploratory and interpretive inquiries will be encouraged for the sharing of experiences regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The concept of anonymity will be used to conceal the identities of the participants.

In accordance with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, theme phases defined by Colaizzi (1978) were used for transcription and analysis following data collection. The one-of-a-kind seven-step procedure provides a rigorous analysis, with each phase remaining true to the facts. The participant's perspectives, as well as their statements and responses, were highlighted and provided to encourage further discussion and interpretation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results revealed that student-parents had different experiences during the pandemic. The following themes were derived.

Theme 1: Unexpected Transitions

"Actually, lisod jud siya e handle, ma'am. First, internet connection. Then, if mag sakit ang baby dayun naa moy online classes. Tapos, the teacher asks "Okay, please answer this question", then suddenly your baby crying, you want to speak but you're shy to turn on the camera or the microphone because your baby is crying – SP5

It is really difficult to handle, ma'am. First, there's the issue of the internet connection. Then, if your baby gets sick, you still have online classes to attend. And when the teacher asks a question, suddenly your baby starts crying. You want to respond, but you feel hesitant to turn on the camera or microphone because your baby is crying".

Many students found themselves unexpectedly becoming parents during the pandemic, which brought about a range of emotions, from joy to anxiety. Balancing the excitement of welcoming a new member into their families with the uncertainties and stress caused by the pandemic added an extra layer of complexity to their lives.

In the study of Almendingen et al. [2] on students experiences with online teaching following the COVID-19 lockdown, results revealed that two weeks into the lockdown, 75% of students reported that their lives had become more difficult, and 50% felt that learning outcomes would be harder to achieve due to the sudden shift to online education. Moreover, Factor [3] stated that the distractions around the house are really hard to deal with, and it is hard to try to find a place at home where one can study or do other things without being interrupted, especially by kids.

Theme 2: Academic Challenges

"So, mao to nga grabi jud nakong adjust jud. Tas ni abot pud to sa point nga nag dungan ug sakit si Sab tas ting finals.

Wala nakoy mahimo. Dapat mo lihok ko bisag kapoy na. Ihilak nalang gud nako – SP7

So, it was really challenging for me to adjust. And then it reached a point where Sab got sick during the finals. I felt helpless. I had to take action, even if I was exhausted. I couldn't help but cry."

Student-parents faced significant academic challenges during the pandemic. The sudden transition to remote learning disrupted their routines and required them to adapt to new modes of instruction. They often had to navigate online classes while simultaneously caring for their children at home. Research by Johnson et al. [4] found that student-parents reported difficulties in finding suitable study environments, managing interruptions, and meeting academic deadlines due to their parenting responsibilities.

Theme 3: Time Management

"Kuan man gud ko kanang example maghatag silag classworks, then kung makaya ra naku buhaton. Buhaton ra dayun naku ang classwork di na naku maghulat anang time nga mag due date na or kanang mag cramming na bitaw ko- SP 3

I have this tendency where if they give examples of classwork, I immediately try to do it if I can. I don't wait until the due date or end up cramming".

Managing time effectively became paramount for student parents. They had to navigate a demanding schedule, which included caring for their children, attending to household responsibilities, and meeting academic deadlines. The blurring of boundaries between work, home, and education made it particularly challenging to strike a balance and allocate time to each aspect of their lives. Effective time management became crucial for student parents during the pandemic. Balancing childcare duties, household chores, and academic commitments was a constant struggle. Chilton et al. [5] highlighted that student-parents had to juggle multiple responsibilities and often faced challenges in allocating dedicated time for studying. The blurring of boundaries between work, home, and education added further complexity to their time management efforts.

Theme 4: Adaptation and Resilience

"Very difficult jud siya, ma'am. Pero kato nga time, ma'am, is akong partner nag online class pud, nag sabot jud mi, ma'am, nga if busy ko unya dili ka busy, take turns gyud ta, pero if both busy jud mi m'am, mangita ju mig help, ma'am. Kauban man namo sa house iyang parents ato. Pag walay buhaton iyang parents manghangyo jud mi, ma'am. Samot na jud ug term exams -SP4

It was really challenging, ma'am. But during that time, ma'am, my partner also had online classes, so we made an agreement that if I was busy and they weren't, we would take turns. But if both of us were busy, we would seek help. Their parents were with us in the house. If we had no other option, their parents would kindly ask for assistance, ma'am. Especially during term exams, it became even more crucial".

Despite the challenges, many students and parents demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. They found innovative ways to manage their time, seek support through online communities, and prioritize their mental health. Some institutions also provided resources and

accommodations to support student parents in their academic pursuits.

Nikiforidou and Holmes [6] in their research posited that student parents underlined predominantly the struggles and challenges experienced but also acknowledged the opportunities and alternatives that occurred. The role of a strict routine and time management as well as the contribution of social support, either from family or more broadly from social networks, are factors in how they became resilient amidst the pressing pandemic.

Theme 5: Emotional and Mental Well-being

“Ni agi jud kog depression ato nga time kay single mom man gud ko. Ato pud nga time, grabi ka pressure sa akoo ba. Grabi akong adjust pa kay lage wala ko na and nga in ana. Tapos gikan sa hospital nga wala kayo ga bantay sa akoo - SP 7

I went through a period of depression during that time because I was a single mom. During that period, I faced immense pressure. I had to make significant adjustments because I felt like I didn't have anyone to rely on. Moreover, there were instances when I had to stay in the hospital without anyone taking care of me”.

The pandemic took a toll on the emotional and mental well-being of students' parents. Isolation, financial stress, and concerns about their children's health contributed to heightened anxiety and emotional distress. Lawless and Berry [7] reported that student-parents experienced increased levels of stress, depression, and feelings of overwhelm during the pandemic. The lack of social support networks due to social distancing measures made it harder for them to seek assistance or find solace in sharing their experiences with others.

Theme 6: Support Systems and Coping Strategies:

“Nalisdan man ko pero dili kayo kay naa man akong husband and naa pud akong mama nga magbantay sa akong baby and mag guide sa akoo. And sa akong teachers na nakabalo sa akong situation, ila kungginahatagan ug consideration. – SPS”

I faced challenges, but not too many because I have my husband and my mother, who take care of my baby and guide me. Additionally, my teachers were aware of my situation, showed understanding, and provided me with considerations.

Despite the difficulties, students and parents showed resilience and employed various coping strategies. Sallee and Sandberg [8] found that student-parents relied on support systems such as online communities, family, and friends to share experiences and seek advice. Some institutions implemented support programs, including virtual parenting support groups and flexible academic policies, to assist student-parents in managing their responsibilities, Johnson et al. [4].

Theme 7: Role Strain and Identity Crisis

“usahay naa mi klase, dayun akong anak wala pa nag kaon. Akong kahintang ato is on ra akong cellphone palungon nako ang camera. Ga luto ko ana, ga luto ko para saiyaha. Dili ra pud para saiya kay para sa tibuok man pud. Kapoy kay to, ma'am kay akoo tanan trabaho – SP 6”.

Sometimes, we have classes, but my child hasn't eaten yet. During those times, I would hold my cellphone and angle the camera away. I would cook, I would cook for both of us. It wasn't just for my child, but for both of us. It was tiring, ma'am, because I had to handle all the responsibilities. Student-parents often experienced role strain and conflict between their identities as students and parents. Balancing the demands and expectations of both roles, along with the pressure to excel academically, created significant stress. Lawless and Berry (2021) discuss the importance of recognizing and validating the experiences of student-parents, as well as creating spaces for them to discuss and navigate identity conflicts. Further Alampay (2019) claims that Filipino families place a great priority on their children's academic success. Filipino parents place a high priority on their children's education, and children in turn see academic success as a way to live up to their parents' expectations and fulfill their own filial duties. That is why students work really hard to keep attending class against the chances, especially if they have experienced an early setback like becoming pregnant or causing someone else to become pregnant.

Theme 8: Access to Resources and Technology

“Basta gabii na “Hala, hapit na alas 10”, “Hala, wala pa na send”. Kanang gamay nalang kulang “Na send na”. Kanang mga video, ma'am ba nga karon na gyud ang submission. Dugay baya kay mag send na labi na ug mag load kay dugay kayo ang oras. “Hala dapat ma send n ani ani nga oras kay kuan na”. Mo dagan ko sa ubos, ma'am kay didto raman mi naay signal. Ay wala man jud mi signal sa kanang mobile phone sa number, walay signal. Ang kuan ra namo is kanang peso peso wifi. So, ang peso wifi, sa ubos pa na sa road lang bitaw siya – SP5”

When it's already late at night, I would say to myself, "Oh no, it's almost 10 When it's already late at night, I would say to myself, "Oh no, it's almost 10 o'clock." "Oh no, I haven't sent it yet. Only a small step is missing: "Just hit send. Especially with video submissions, ma'am, they have to be submitted on time. It takes a while for the video to send, especially when the internet connection is slow and the loading time is prolonged. Oh no, it should have been sent by this time. I would run downstairs, ma'am, because that's where we had a signal. Unfortunately, there's no signal on the mobile phone number we have; there's no signal at all. Our only option is peso wifi. The "peso wifi" is located at the bottom of the road”.

The shift to remote learning posed struggles for students and parents in terms of accessing necessary resources and technology. Limited access to reliable internet connections, computers, and other learning tools impacted their ability to fully engage in online classes and complete assignments. Johnson et al. [4] stress the importance of institutions providing equitable access to technology and ensuring that student-parents have the necessary resources for successful remote learning.

4. CONCLUSION

The experiences of students who became parents during the pandemic highlight the unique and often arduous journey they embarked upon. Balancing the responsibilities of parenthood and education became more demanding with the

added complexities of the pandemic. Nevertheless, these students exhibited resilience and resourcefulness, adapting to the circumstances and finding ways to overcome the obstacles they faced.

Understanding the experiences of these student-parents is crucial for institutions and policymakers to create a supportive environment that recognizes and addresses their needs. By acknowledging the challenges faced by this group, educational institutions can implement policies and provide resources that empower student-parents to successfully navigate their academic pursuits while fulfilling their responsibilities as parents.

The experiences of students who became parents during the pandemic reveal the unique and multifaceted challenges they faced in balancing their roles as parents and students. These challenges encompassed academic hurdles, time management difficulties, emotional and mental well-being concerns, financial strain, and identity conflicts. However, student-parents also demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and the utilization of support systems and coping strategies to navigate these challenges.

To better support student parents, educational institutions may recognize and address their specific needs. The following recommendations emerge from the study:

1. **Institutional Support:** Educational institutions should establish dedicated support systems tailored to the needs of student parents. This includes providing accessible and affordable childcare services, flexible academic policies, and financial assistance to alleviate the financial strain faced by student parents.
2. **Academic Flexibility:** Institutions should offer flexible scheduling options, such as asynchronous classes or part-time study arrangements, to accommodate the responsibilities of student parents. Providing alternative modes of learning and assessment can help ensure their academic progress.
3. **Emotional and Mental Health Support:** Access to mental health resources, counseling services, and peer support networks should be readily available to student-parents. Institutions can collaborate with healthcare providers or offer virtual support groups specifically designed for student parents to address their emotional well-being.
4. **Technology and Resource Access:** Ensuring equitable access to reliable technology and learning resources is crucial. Institutions should provide support in terms of loaner laptops, internet connectivity, and access to software platforms, ensuring that students and parents have the necessary tools to fully participate in remote learning.
5. **Parenting Guidance and Developmental Support:** Institutions should provide resources and guidance on parenting strategies, child development, and early childhood education to help student-parents foster positive parent-child relationships and cater to their children's developmental needs.
6. **Mentorship and Career Support:** Establishing mentorship programs and career services specifically tailored to student-parents can assist them in navigating the challenges of balancing parenting responsibilities and career aspirations. This can include assistance with internships, networking opportunities, and career counseling.

By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment that recognizes and addresses the unique experiences and challenges faced by students and parents. This will enable student-parents to successfully pursue their education, enhance their well-being, and achieve their academic and career goals while raising their children.

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