



Untold Stories of Student-Mothers' Academic Journey: A Phenomenology

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Abstract

It is a daunting task to balance motherhood with the requirements of academic life. For generations, married women who decided to continue their academic endeavor remained to have household responsibilities. This social obligation, combined with academic life's demand, generates a clash of roles. This qualitative-phenomenological study explored and described the academic experiences of married women students. The instrument used to obtain the essential information was the researchers-made interview guide questionnaire which was validated by experts. Eight student-mothers were purposively chosen to participate in this study. Results revealed that majority of participants encountered academic difficulties like managing time, taking care of the baby when sick, finishing all school work, and becoming homesick. To cope with these challenges, the participants relied on doing what were relevant, making things fast, multi-tasking, and dividing school and family time wisely. The results implicate that academic institutions may consider intervention programs for student-mothers and may include as part of their corporate social responsibility. Education is undoubtedly a source of empowerment and development. It should be noted that to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs of gender equality and empowerment, women's education is needed.

Keywords: student-mother, difficulties, experiences, SPAMAST

Introduction

A fair and equitable society requires open access to schooling (Brayboy et al., 2007). In the higher education organization, student-mothers face important obstacles to academic achievement (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Pinilla & Munoz, 2005). In addition to their situation as student, this cohort of students has unique needs and various responsibilities. Therefore, researching and understanding their experiences is critical. The experiences of married-students who raise children while pursuing

higher education have received scant attention in academic and psychological literature (Haleman, 2004; Ricco, et al., 2003).

Education has been recognized as a core element of individual development (Salazar et al., 2016). Thousands of students go to different colleges and universities each year to enjoy the “college life” that includes partying, drinking, meeting new people, fostering new friendships and participating in romantic relationships, activities that can be viewed as stereotypical college students (Arum et al., 2018; Manalang et al., 2016).

According to the studies of Manalang et al., (2016) and Walag et al., (2018) one in every 10 young Filipino women aged 15-19 started childbearing. Moreover, results of the 2013 National Demographic and Health Survey according to Authority (2017) revealed that eight percent of these young women were already mothers and another two percent is pregnant of their first child. Likewise, young women between 20 and 24, less than half was already mothers and four percent was pregnant with their first child. These age levels are college students' age. Schooling was important to the lives of young women because the level of education they obtained affect their futures.

Student-mothers endure emotional stresses and receive negative input from the learning community, suggesting that the first priority is education (Smith, 2019). In addition, discrimination against and marking student-mothers as non-productive stimulates avoidance behaviors and the unequal distribution of educational resources to other students (Gaytos et al., 2019; Ogunji et al., 2020). Student-mothers therefore avoid taking their child with them or concealing their parental roles (Williams, 2006; Behboodi-Moghadam, 2017). Bringing a child from an academic perspective means that the student-mothers do not have the interest and motivation needed to take the appropriate steps for academic growth (Gonchar, 1995).

There are no question that education is a source of inspiration and development (Kaur, 2017; Shetty & Hans, 2015). In every community, achieving development objective depends on the participation of women. Education is known as a developmental instrument and as the right of a woman. Nevertheless, in the academic setting, the features of female reproduction have become an obstacle to the achievement of certain female students' full potential. The reproduction rights of a woman, such as having the right to have children, are not regarded as equally essential as their fights to education. It is important that the reproductive rights of women are acknowledged in academic settings and their educational rights are protected in view of their demographic characteristics (Darteh et al., 2014). With increased financial burdens, new social experiences, and a spouse with whom they must prepare their future, married college students have several different responsibilities than typical students (Amoabea et al., 2020; Thorpe, 1951).

The number of women entering universities has risen around the world since 1966 (Williams et al., 2006). A woman can enthusiastically take in the parallel roles of mother and student; however, performing these two roles may take the person in two directions, even under ideals circumstances (Behboodi et al., 2017). For student-mothers, it is a major dilemma to mix motherhood and learning without losing the other. Her actions may contrast with her traditional role as a mother if a woman has to focus all her attention on her study (Macaluso, 2020; Musili 2018). Academic operations and challenging competitions are therefore intertwined. Therefore, motherhood responsibilities put a significant responsibility on the mother students. In universities, taking on motherhood along with studies is not deemed natural.

Based on the researcher's preliminary interviews, the current situation of the student-mothers in Southern Philippines Agri-business and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology (SPAMAST) Digos Campus showed that they were financially burdened; most of them ran out of budget because they needed to provide for their schooling and for their child. In particular, student-mothers who relied on their parents did not know what to prioritize. Some student-mothers who had working partners often had difficulty budgeting their funds for their family and school expenses. In addition, time management was another problem. They claimed that it was very difficult because they had to learn wisely to handle their time. First, as both child care and student duties were equally relevant, they didn't know what to prioritize. Aside from scheduling issues, it was hard on their sides to keep their attention on what they were doing at any time. According to them becoming student-mothers was stressful because while they were in school, they found their selves thinking about their sick child and while if they were at home

they thought of their unfinished home works and assignments. It was on this ground that this investigation of the student-mothers academic journey was anchored.

Research Objectives

The goal of this study was to explore and determine the scholastic experiences married women-students who were enrolled in Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Technology and Livelihood Education of SPAMAST-Digos Campus. Specifically, it was conducted:

1. To determine the scholastic experiences married women-students;
2. To determine how the married women-students take their dual role;
3. To determine the significant experiences the married women-students worth sharing to other.

Scope and Limitations

The study focused only on the scholastic experiences of 3rd year and 4th year married women-students who were enrolled at SPAMAST Digos Campus. This study did not include unmarried and professional students. Likewise, this investigation study used the qualitative method particularly phenomenology.

Theoretical Lens

This research was based on various assumptions. Mckeown et al., (2002) claimed that education in an important instrument for achieving the goal; Noreen and Khalid (2012) and Singh et al., (2013) noted that education is a crucial aspect of gender equality; Gupta (2014) pointed out that it would be a gain to society as a whole to allow women and girls to be educated; thus as Subrahmanian (2005) put it, consideration of gender equality in education – meaningful educational outcomes that connect equality in education with broader gender justice processes.

The United Nations (UN) framework produced eight Millennium Development Goals in 2000 (MDGs). MDG 3 aims to foster gender equality and women's empowerment. The goal also includes an aim for education, women's employment, and political participation. The UN member states have acknowledged that gender inequality not only reduces the possibility of achieving other goals, but also that the development of gender equality and women's empowerment is dependent on progress toward each of the other goals (UNDG, 2010; UNDP, 1995). In the broadest sense, empowerment reflects the degree to which women have gained economic and political influence. It therefore seeks to quantify the position of welfare and women as members of society (Bardhan & Klasse, 1997). Advancement of women can be seen as a phase in which awareness and consciousness, alternatives to choice, wealth, expression, and engagement and agency are seen (Kabeer, 1999).

Achieving the goal of the MDGs is an unfinished agenda and with a new development paradigm, involves extensive and revolutionary methods. Education is recognized as a developmental tool and the right of women. Nevertheless, for many female students, the characteristics of female reproduction have been an obstacle to achieving their full potential in the academic setting. A woman's reproductive rights, such as having the right to have children, are not considered to be as important as her right to education. It is necessary to recognize women's reproductive rights in academic settings and to protect their educational rights in view of their demographic characteristics.

Method

Research Design

This investigation used the qualitative-phenomenology method. The qualitative approach is commonly used when an investigation's objective is to explore people's personal experiences and perspectives. Jackson et al., (2007) noted that qualitative method implores humanistic and interpretive approach. Its main concern is the interpretation of the experiences of the person who encounters the phenomenon.

Phenomenological method is appropriate in this study because as Patton (1990) mentioned that it is used to explore 'how it is that individuals' experiences what they experience'. This means that in phenomenology, the value of the experience of something to be grasped and understood are the focused. For Groenwald (2004) and McNamara (2005), phenomenology focuses on 'the essence, meaning and consciousness of the experience; for Connelly (2010) and San Jose et al., (2017), it is used to inquire

about the 'lived experiences' of a person; and Schwandt (2000) phenomenology understands "how the everyday, inter-subjective world is constituted". In this research, the real experiences, encounters, and insights of the student-mother were given utmost attention.

Research Instrument

The main instrument used was the researchers-made interview guide questionnaires. The questions were anchored on the research objectives. DBM and San Jose (2017) mentioned that interview guide questions are usually utilized in a focus group to 'cull information' pertinent to the study. The research questionnaire was composed of three main questions which focused on the experiences of the student-mothers in their academic journeys, their coping mechanism in dealing with their dual role as mothers and students, and their significant experiences which were worth sharing with other mother-students.

Research Participants

There were eight student-mothers in Bachelor of Science in Education major in Technology Livelihood Education. Five of the student-mothers were legally married while the other three were lived-in. All of these student-mothers had children. Some of them were living in Digos City (6kms from the college) while others were from nearby towns with the province. The participants were purposely selected. The researchers only included those who gave their permissions.

Gathering of Information

In gathering the information, the researchers followed the following steps.

Asking for Permission. A letter of permission was given to the Dean for the conduct of the study. After the approval of the Dean, consent letters were also given to the selected participants.

Conduct of Interviews. Before the conduct of the interviews, protocols were done to address the ethical considerations of research. After everything was settled, the interviews were conducted. After the interviews, the information obtained were transcribed and returned to the married women-students for self-verifications, modification, verification, and corrections.

Data Analysis. After the transcripts were verified by the participants, it was subjected to data and thematic analyses.

Ethical Consideration

Necessary protocols were followed by the researchers to address the ethics of research. The student-mothers were given letters of consent stating the objectives of the study. Moreover, confidentiality and withdrawal clauses were stated. Student-mothers were given enough time to decide whether to participate or not in the study. Moreover, justice was observed by giving back the verbatim transcription of the information obtained; by allowing the participants to verify and delete information which they felt unnecessary; and disclosing to the participants the findings of the study. Likewise, convenience of the participants was considered. They were given the options when and where the in-depth interviews should be conducted. Finally, the privacy of the student-mothers was respected by not disclosing their personal details in the entire study.

Results and Discussion

In presenting the findings of this study, the researcher followed San Jose's (2019) presentation. The findings were put into a table with three columns. The first columns draw the themes from the gathered information. Then these themes were classified into General, Typical, and Variant. General if responses reached fifty percent and above; Typical from 21% to 49%; while Variant 20% and less. Moreover, the verbatim with tags were presented to further expound the participants' answers.

Table 1. Themes and Cores Ideas on Academic Journeys of Student-Mothers

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Frequency of Response
Motivation for Schooling	- doing school for the family and baby	General
	- becoming independent, gaining more friends, applying time management and improving character	Variant
Complication with schooling	- managing time	General
	- baby getting sick, finishing all school work and becoming homesick	Variant
Handling difficulties	- dividing time wisely with family and school works	General
	- praying for inspiration	Variant
	- taking time to become wise	
	- thinking positively	
	- taking control of the situation	
- considering the family		
Consideration on time management	- finishing school work at school in order not to conflict with family time	General
	- doing what is relevant	Variant
	- making things fast	
Relevance of the experience	- multi-tasking	General
	- guiding others on how to manage school and family	
Advice for other student-mothers	- inspiring others to continue in spite of the difficulties	Variant
	- facing all challenges	General
	- continuing with their dreams	
	- considering family or motivation	
- becoming patient and strong	Variant	

Motivation for School

As this study travelled forward in relation to the responses given by the student-mothers, it was very evident that motivation for school was one of the good experiences. The table above shows the different themes and core ideas on the academic experiences of student-mothers. The first major theme revolved around the motivation for school with the following core ideas: doing school for the family and baby, becoming independent, gaining more friends, applying time-management and improving character. The answers of the student-mothers evidently insinuated that having a child while schooling serves as their motivation for school. In fact, two of the participants said that having a husband and a child inspired them to finish their studies.

“I am more determined and inspired to finish my studies for my baby and families.”
FGD1Pg1L5

In addition, another two participants mentioned that having a family while studying made them felt more independent and wiser in dealing family-related problems.

“As a student-mother I have good experience like being independent and it teaches me how to deal with family-related problems.” FGD2Pg2L1-3

Similarly, another participant shared that she gained more friends and also it improved her skills and learning.

“I gained more friends and also it improves my skills and my learning.”
FGD3Pg3L1-3

Further, another participant mentioned that her baby’s smile relieved all the tiredness and made her felt better.

“If I am tired and drained from school my baby’s smile remove it when I got home and makes me feel so relieve.” FGD4Pg4L1-3

The participants pursued their education despite the challenges because they were inspired by their children. They believed that finishing a degree in college could give them better future. According to Lie (2010) individuals have different motivation in pursuing something. It could be intrinsic or

extrinsic. In this case, the student-mothers had their intrinsic motivations. They decided to continue with their professional growth because of they wanted to show to their families they can do it despite the challenges. This motivation of student-mothers according Wilsey (2013) realizes their self-fulfilment and goal attainment. Thus, Mckeown et al., (2002) were correct when they emphasized that education is seen to be relevant by student-mothers in order to achieve their human desires.

Complication with Schooling

The second major theme revolved around the complication with schooling had the following core ideas: managing time, baby getting sick, finishing all school work, and becoming homesick. Student-mothers revealed that their situations were hard. They had difficulty managing most of their times because they needed to balance their family obligations with their schooling. They admitted that they needed to do multi-tasking.

"It's hard to me to manage my time. Sometimes I came late in school because I should fix first my child before she and I got to school." FGD1Pg1L6-10

"When my baby was sick, I wasn't able to attend my class." FGD2Pg2L4-5

"There are so many tasks that I have to finish in that particular day. I don't even know what to start and where to start." FGD3Pg3L4-6

"Family problem and homesick." FGD4Pg4L4

Based on the responses of the participants, there were complications with schooling of student-mothers. This result supported Taukeni (2014) who stated that the primary difficulties of student-mothers were the lack of time to handle their studies and parental roles at the same time. Further, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) mentioned that time and spacing were main problems of student-mothers with children. Thus, there was a need for the student-mothers to sacrifice one to fulfil the other. Kabeer (1999) was correct when he argued that society needs to be conscious and aware of the circumstances for women to advance; hence, women should be given options for themselves.

Handling Difficulties

Another major theme emerged from the in-depth interview was handling difficulties. It had the following core ideas: praying for inspiration, taking time and becoming wise, thinking positively, taking control of the situation, and considering the family. Generally, the student-mothers found dividing time wisely with family and school works were difficult to handle. They needed to take extra efforts just to meet the two. They also needed to multi-task or do things fast. On the other hand, one of the participants mentioned that she managed her difficulties through praying every day and believing that her difficulties were just trials. In terms of money, she said that she must know how to budget her allowances. She also added that she needed to choose wisely what relevant things she needed.

"Through prayer every day and believe that all of this is just trials. About the financial of course, you must know how to budget the allowance. Always choose the needs not the wants." FGD1Pg1L11-15

Another participant also shared that she needed to be time-conscious so that she could have some time to rest and be wise when spending her finances.

"I have to be time-conscious, take time to rest, and be wise when it comes to money." FGD2Pg2L6-7

Also, a participant said that by having positive thoughts, she could find always the solutions to any problem.

"By thinking of positive thoughts that in any problem there's always a way and solution." FGD3Pg3L7-8

The statements of the student-mothers clearly established that they were using time management and organizational strategies to cope with the complications. Kent (2018) opined that life experiences can provide individuals with useful time-management and multi-tasking skills to effect of working busy schedules of student-mothers. Likewise, Keven and Webb (2004) and Kouri et al., (2016) supported that multi-tasking has always been in the narratives of student-mothers; thus, multi-tasking is already a mark of these individuals. In coping with role conflicts, Hall (1972) offered three forms of coping behavior. The first form was relocating and sharing one's position task shifts. The second form was modifying one's personal notion of role requirement obtain from others. The third was enhancing the

consistency of role performance without changing the systematic or personal concepts of role. Thus, with the student-mothers positivity of thoughts on their situations, they were able to survive. Sameer (2018) was right when he mentioned that positivity of mind leads to innovative behavior.

Likewise, it was also mentioned in the results that prayers were necessary in handling the difficulties. This implies that few student-mothers were religious and believed in the power of God. Kessler (1985) said that prayers truly provide assistance to improve someone's condition; for Levine (2008) prayer with meditative state allows someone to relax and to take away the burdens they feel; for Rezae et al., (2008) averred that prayers provide resource to withstand while Teo et al., (2018) said that prayers offers reprieve.

Consideration of time management

The fourth theme revolved was the consideration on time management. This theme had the following variant core ideas: doing what was relevant, making things fast and multi-tasking. The general core idea for this theme was that finishing school work at school in order not to conflict with family time. One of our student-mothers openly shared that she managed her time by disregarding unnecessary activities to have enough time for her studies.

"I disregard unnecessary activities to make sure I can have enough time for my studies." FGD1Pg1L16

On the other side, one of our student-mother here in SPAMAST said that she managed her time by working faster to cope up everything.

"I work with it faster to cope up everything." FGD2Pg2L8

In relation to this, another student-mother straightforwardly shared that she managed her time by multi-tasking.

"I do multi-tasking" FGD3Pg3L7

Furthermore, one of the student-mothers mentioned that she managed her time for her family after she finished all her home works and assignments at school days so that she could spend the whole weekend with her family.

"Through finishing all the students work in school days for in the weekend I spend all that time to my family." FGD4Pg4L5-6

It is a difficult task to have dual roles. Student-mothers made sure that they could still manage to do each role without sacrificing the other, considering the busy schedules they had. During the focus group, the participants revealed that they ignored unnecessary activities and observed multi-tasking. Kariv and Heiman (2005) and Morris et al., (2003) discussed the use of task-oriented coping strategies by students who have various tasks. The findings showed that the participants understood how to prioritize and control their time, which suggests that coping strategies were needed to minimize their level of stress. Braund et al., (2020) mentioned that grit ability is usually demonstrated by student-mothers. Through their grit, student-mothers develop the ability to start courage, to become resilience, to develop endurance, and to strive for excellence.

Relevance of the Experience

The fifth major theme revolved around the relevance of the experiences of the student-mothers. General core ideas were guiding others on how to manage school and family while the typical core idea was inspiring others to continue in spite the difficulties. One of the student-mothers said that through her experiences she gained more insights which made her more mature. She also added that she learned to pursue her dreams not just for herself but also for her family.

"I considered my experiences as essential for others because in this situation you can gain more learning from it that makes you more mature and learn to pursue dreams not only for your better future but to your family also." FGD1Pg1L17-19

Similarly, another student-mother confidently shared that it was very important for other to know how difficult it was to be a student-mother. However, she seriously added that someone needed to reflect deeply before engaging into marriage life. She was implying that women like her had the option in choosing the path of their lives.

"It is helpful to share this to others so that they will know how difficult to be a student-mother. Before they engage this kind of situation, they have to plan wisely for their own welfare." FGD2Pg2L9-11

Another student-mother pointed out that becoming a mother was not a hindrance in pursuing their life's goal. The experience she had could be a source of encouragement to empower herself.

"This is definitely helpful to others so that they will never lose hope in reaching their dreams and the experiences that they've got they will make it as a motivation." FGD3Pg3L8-10

Furthermore, another student-mother bravely said that through her experiences others could obtain insights to do well in life.

"It helps others to work well." FGD4Pg4L7

Experience involves meeting, witnessing, or experiencing things in general when someone takes place over time (Pretorius, 1997). Someone is likely to be aware of their life experiences do not satisfy their expectations (Jarvis, 2009). If the experience is able to draw lessons from the particular experience by reflecting on the raw experience, then the experience becomes a learning experience (Kolb, 1984; Lehane, 2020; Smith et al., 2017). Many studies have shown that the main and most valued method learning is learning from life experiences (Jarvis, 2009; Merriam & Clark, 1993; Reid et al., 2020). Positive human growth relates to wisdom and understanding from important life experiences (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Jarvis, 2000). The acts that people take to embody their ideas also often influence their surroundings; people whose embodiment produces positive effects not only for themselves, but also for other at the person, personal, communal, social, or even global levels are often credited with greater wisdom (Coleman, 1988; Danish et al., 2020).

The results of this study presented that these student-mothers did not lose their aspiration despite their conditions. It was clear to them that the consequences of their actions and there should be no regrets. Their burning desire to pursue their dreams through education remained intact.

Advice for other student-mothers

The academic experiences of student-mothers of were enumerated and crystalized during the in-depth interviews. The last major theme formulated was advice for other student-mothers and two variant core ideas such as considering family as motivation and becoming patient and strong. One of the student-mothers gave her parental advice for the young female. She didactically stated that if possible young female should avoid engaging in early marriage because it was not really easy. She also added that right timing is important. She mentioned that whenever they choose to become student-mother, they need to be ready in facing the challenges.

"In as much as possible, don't engage this kind of situation because it was not a joke. Wait for the right time. And if you engage in this kind of situation, you have to be ready to face the challenges." FGD1Pg1L20-24

Similarly, another student-mother shared some valuable piece of advice to the other student-mother to put in mind that there is always a way to continue reaching their dreams so they should never give up.

"My advice to other student-mother is always put in your mind that there is always a way to continue reaching your dreams so don't give up!" FGD2Pg2L12-14

Likewise, another student-mother sincerely advice to make their family as inspiration in order for them to achieve their dreams, their goals in life, and to become successful in the future.

"Make your family as your inspiration in order for you to achieve your dreams, your goals in life and to become successful in the future." FGD3Pg3L11-12

Furthermore, a salutary advice was given by another student-mother to the other student-mothers to be sturdy in life challenges and value the importance of patience in solving the problems that encounter.

"Just be strong and patient in every problem that may arise." FGD4Pg4L8

The results showed that student-mothers had not turning back on their situations. The best thing they could do was to give pieces of advice to others to help them realize the life of a student mother, to

remind them that although the choice was theirs to make, in a much as possible avoid marrying at early age and if they were already on the situation, they needed to learn from each other.

Conclusion

Motherhood can be described as difficult but beautiful adventure. When mothers incorporate conditions for shifting global roles, such as working outside the home and supporting education, this significant challenge becomes more complicated. This study finds that majority of respondents faced academic challenges such as managing time, baby getting sick, finishing all school work and becoming homesick. To cope with the uphill challenges, the participants rely on doing what are relevant, making things fast, multitasking, and dividing time wisely. This implies that these individuals need special provisions in order for unburden them. The academic institution may offer them consideration in order for them to survive such as providing modular program; shortening time spend in school, lessening requirements and homework, and counseling services. Similarly, in order to overcome their homesickness, to minimize their feeling of loneliness, and to have a forum where they can share their concerns and fears about their experiences on and off campus, these student-mothers need support groups. Although the results of the study do not generalized all student-mothers, the findings of the study can be seen as part of raising awareness of the common difficulties experienced by student-mothers, thus, worth the attention of the academic institution.

Implication

With the results, the researchers realized that student-mothers need academic guidance from the institution for them to pursue their professional endeavor and for them to be empowered. Academic institution may consider extending support to student-mothers as part of their corporate social responsibility.

With the result, those difficulties maybe accepted as positive challenges to make them more determined, motivated and work hard to pursue their dreams. In short, their experiences may serve as an eye opener in their journey towards their dreams and goals in life; however, considering the negative effects of difficulties which make them prone to stress. Furthermore, researchers learned that the student-mothers difficulties facilitate development of values, skills and knowledge in handling and teaching their students. It trains them to have discipline, patience, commitment, intelligence, responsibilities and teamwork.

Lastly, the findings of the study implicate that parents need to re-integrate the value of patience among their children. Getting married at an early age may not result to better life but the other way around. Parents may emphasize finishing education first before getting into marriage.

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