

Challenges of Student-mothers in the Tertiary Education of University of Perpetual Help System-DALTA

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ABSTRACT

This paper utilized phenomenological qualitative research to determine the lived experiences of ten students who are also mothers in pursuing their college education. The participants were identified using purposive sampling. The participants were screened using the following inclusion criteria: enrolled in any bachelor's degree and had one or more children. The researcher used an informal interview as tool in gathering the data. Five themes emerged from the participants' data: the meaning of a woman and a mother, becoming young mothers, the importance of fulfilling their dreams, the challenges and difficulties they faced in their studies, and the effect of schooling in their life. All participants believed that women are strong in facing the adversities in life. On the other hand, mothers to the participants need not depend on men to support their children. The participants also likened the word mother to love and sacrifice. The lived experiences of these student-mothers won my admiration for they live their life to the fullest by becoming good mothers at the same time good students.

1. Introduction

Education plays a very important role in equating the quality of life of men and women not only in the Philippines but most part of the world. It also provides an opportunity for all women to prove themselves personally and professionally (Zerrudo 2011). Imbong (2009) cited that education empowers women to be more responsible and productive citizens of the society. This is supported by the data from the National Statistics Office of the Philippines that more girls were able to graduate and complete their grade school and high school education for school year 2010-2011 than their male counterparts. The Philippine National Statistic Office in 2010 revealed that there were more professional females than males. This implies that women are driven and determined to study and finish their education. Though faced with many challenges and inequality, there are still a number of women who rise above and face these challenges headfirst. Even untimely motherhood has not deterred some women to continue their studies and acquire a degree. Hinton-Smith (2012), revealed that women especially the single mothers believe that education is important for them to provide a better life and future for children. These single mothers strive very hard to finish their education as a means of securing a better future.

This is in contrast with the study of Lynch 2008 that showed a substantial report on the attrition rate of the female graduates in the United States. The study shows that the role of single mothers are usually in conflict with their role and responsibility as students. They found difficulty juggling the roles of being mothers and at the same time students.

The study of Brown et. al. 2012 showed the increasing number of pregnant and parenting students in higher education and this population experiences added pressure and stress while pursuing their education since the university does not adequately promulgate them in the school community. Morand et. al 2009, found out that the main issues students with dependent children faced once at university are time and timing, finance, childcare, confidence, sense of belonging and skills.

The study of the Moreau et. al. 2013 also showed that student parents often describe their experience of navigating academia as a struggle, in which time-related, financial, health and emotional problems prevail. With the data from the aforementioned literature, the researcher was inspired to determine the challenges that the students who are also mothers faced in the tertiary level of this university.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The research aimed to determine the challenges that the student- mothers faced in the tertiary level of the University of Perpetual Help System-DALTA through the use of unstructured interviews.

2. Method

This study is a phenomenological qualitative research that aimed to determine the lived experiences of student-mothers who are pursuing their college education. The method in Phenomenological qualitative research according to Moustakas 1994, begins with formulation of the questions that have both social meaning and personal significance. The research participants in this method have experienced the phenomenon and are intensely interested in understanding its nature and meaning. The data collection commenced with the informal interview that involves an informal, interactive processes and utilizes open ended comment and questions. The data were organized and analyzed through horizontalization, determining the textural descriptions of the experience. From the textural description, structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon are constructed. The participants in this study were ten (10) students who are also mothers and are enrolled in tertiary level. Purposive sampling was used because the respondents were chosen on the basis of their knowledge of the desired information and their accessibility. The participants were made to sign the informed consent. They were also informed about nature and purpose of the study and that their identity will be held in strict confidentiality.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Self-Efficacy Theory of Albert Bandura and Feminist Standpoint theory. Self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs and how these influence their capabilities and performances in living their lives. These beliefs affect how people think critically and creatively, feels sincerely and decide wisely. Pajares 2016, stated that self-efficacy is rooted within Bandura's social cognitive perspective. It is a well-known fact that all individuals are gifted with certain abilities. These capabilities are pivotal in planning, learning, self-regulating and reflecting. These also allows human beings to shape, determine, and realize their own purpose in life. Kendra 2016, specified that mastery experiences, social modelling, social persuasion, and psychological responses are the four major sources of self-efficacy. However, the success or failure of one's endeavour may strengthen or weaken one's self-efficacy. On the other hand, Feminist standpoint theory as discussed by Aptheker 1989, suggests that the lived experiences of women may it be personal and social contribute to their total well-being. She also emphasizes that communication and friendship are very significant in the dailiness of life. Dailiness are the activities being done by women that creates pattern in achieving certain goals in life. Hence, the study aimed to determine the self-efficacy of students who are also mothers, the challenges they faced and the lived experiences they had in the course of their study in the tertiary level.

4. Results and Discussion

The phenomenological data were analyzed using Colazzi method that begins with the horizontalization. I begin the interview by asking the participants about the definition of a woman and a mother. One of the participants answered that a woman is somebody who can stand and live alone even without the help of a boyfriend or a husband. Another participant answered that a woman can survive all adversities that come their way. She further elaborated that women are no longer the underdog that they were used to be. The meaning of a woman for these participants were centered on a woman being strong in supporting their own children and strong in facing life's challenges. Moreover, the definition of a "mother" to them varied from each participant. One co- researcher defined mother as somebody who loves her children so much and is willing to do everything for the sake of her child. One participant said that a mother is someone who is willing to prioritize her children. Mother for the other participant means sacrifice and a lifetime commitment. Hence, the meaning of a mother to these participants centered on love and sacrifice. The second question in the informal interview is their view on marriage. Since eight of the participants are not married, marriage is not given emphasis and importance in their answers. However, two of the participants perceived the importance of marriage in their union as knot that ties their relationship for real and for a lifetime. They further said, that being married to the father of their children makes their parenting easy because they have partner to share the responsibility with. The third focal point in the interview focused on the perspective of becoming a young mother.

Most of the respondents became mothers between the ages of 16 to 23 years old. Seven of them decided to live and raise their child alone, because they felt that their boyfriends are not yet ready to face the responsibilities of being a father. One is co-habiting with her partner, while two of them married the fathers of their children. They settled down with the father of their children because they want their children to grow with a complete family. The fourth focus was *the importance of fulfilling their dreams*. All participants realized the significant of fulfilling their dreams not only for themselves but as well as for their family. Most of them wanted to provide a better life for their children. These are some of the answers quoted (verbatim) from the participants. **Student A** cited that “Despite the circumstances, I still have dreams that I want to pursue. Instead of being discouraged, I was actually inspired and more motivated to strive harder and persevere so I could reach my goals and aspirations in life-not just for myself, but also for my parents, and most importantly, for my daughter so I could give her a good life and a bright future. **Student D** said that “I want to continue what my mother and I dreamed. As a single mother its hard, if I will just stay at home or work with a low salary. I want to pursue my dreams for the sake of my mother. **Student F** said that “I did not stop schooling when I got pregnant. Even though I became pregnant at an early age of my life, I still have dreams, and the more I need to accomplish it because of my daughter. Finishing studies is the only and best opinion for me, for her to have a good life. I have to take care a leap of faith knowing my responsibilities are much bigger now already.” **Student G** mentioned that “ I really wanted to pursue my dreams that’s why I chose to finish my studies. I also thought of the future of my son and my family as well. I want to give them better life”. The respondents further believed that finishing their education is the key in acquiring a decent job so they can provide for their children and have a good life. They also thought that having a college diploma will make their family proud especially their parents and their kids.

The fifth perspective was *the challenges and difficulties they faced in their studies*. Juggling the roles of being a mother and at the same time a student is not that easy. The student-mothers often experienced difficulties as they hurdle the life in the tertiary education. Bosh (2013), found out that Postgraduate student-mothers managed to do multi-tasking activities, like taking good care of their children while studying. However, these activities would be much manageable if moral and financial support from parents, and partners were evident. This is similar with the findings of this study that most of the respondents revealed that time, attention and financial provision were the main challenges they encountered in their studies. **Student F** said “that the most challenging thing I encountered as of today was balancing my time from schooling and taking care of her (daughter). Especially now with all the paper works and researches I have to finish. Challenges such as going to school early, coming to class and not being tired after stressful days. I have difficulties leaving my child at home because I am always worried if she had eaten her meal already, took her vitamins and so on. Four of the respondents cited that they found difficulty leaving their kids especially when the kids were sick. **Student G** said that “There were times that I found it difficult to go to school especially when my child is sick. Sometimes I can’t even do my homework/school works properly because I have to take care of my son. I also did not have the chance to be on any school gathering. **Student H** mentioned that “There were times when I had to be absent from my class because my child is sick. I had to take care of him”. **Student I** stated that “as a mother-student, it is very difficult because you have to balance everything. There’s a time when I was not able to go to school because my daughter was sick. **Student J** stated that “I can’t make my assignments or projects on time. I can’t stay long outside or in school. I can’t go to the meetings that we need for or group works specifically thesis. I got absent every time my daughter is sick. **Student B** stated that “my attention gets divided between school works and my son. I feel really bad whenever I had school works or attend classes on Saturdays because for me weekends are supposed to be spent with the family. **Student A** stated that “As a mother-student, the most difficult thing for me is providing for my daughter. Since I am still going to school and my parents do not want me to work, it is a challenge, financially, to be able to buy my daughter’s needs, sends her to school, and also pay for her yaya’s (nanny) salary. Since, we are living away from my family and no one else will look after her while I am in school.

The sixth focal point of the interview was the *effect of schooling on their life*. Most of the co-researches believed that schooling has broadened their perspective in life. **Student A** cited that “Schooling has widened my perspective and made me more grateful for the little things in life. Knowing not everyone who has become a young parent is as fortunate as I am. I value the gift of education and schooling has taught me to always be goal-oriented. Schooling also made me realize that after all struggles, hard work really does pay off. **Student E** mentioned that “it’s a stepping stone for me. Stepping stone towards success. It feels like something I can be proud and boast even though I’m a teenage single mom. Something I can share to Gab (name of her son) that I did everything just to give him the BEST things and that is to finish my school. He’s the only reason why I still continue my course. **Student H** said that “studying is not really about learning. It is also about building your self-esteem. It is about creating a more confident self who can face every endeavor that will come your way. **Student G** stated that “the best effect of schooling in my life is that because of my decision to continue my studies. I can now work as a teacher and I can give my child the better life he deserves. This is supported by the statement of **Student J** that “it’s hard to

go back to school but for my daughter's future I strive harder to finish my studies. **Student I** stated that "The effects of schooling in my life are not easy. Being a student-mother is a very big responsibility. It's like the time I spent in school versus my daughter's need of having a mother. But, I do believe that no matter what, this schooling will help me as well as my family. **Student B** revealed that "since I studied SPED it gave me information that helped me in understanding and taking care of my son (the son was diagnosed with autism).

The participants also learned how to balance their time in schooling. **Student A** mentioned that "I have learned the art of maximizing my time so I could fulfill my obligations as a mother, as a student, and as a student-leader. The key for me is really knowing my priorities, setting them straight, keeping a checklist of to – do's, and making sure there aren't any conflicts in my schedules. **Student B** stated that "I balance my time by doing projects or school works in advance. I try to finish or work on projects the whole day so that the following day is given for my son. I also entrust my child to the *yaya* and instruct her how to tutor my son. **Student E** surmised that "Whenever he's asleep, instead of resting, I will do all my chores at home, fix his things, clean his toys, cook for him, etc. when I am in school my mom is looking after him. **Student F** said that "it's a good thing that I have a long vacant at school it is my time to finish school works, so that when I'm already at home I can fully focus on her, playing with her and taking care of her. I can also wait for the time that she is already sleeping and I will grab that opportunity to finish my school works and go to work at night. **Student J** shared the same strategies she cited that "Honestly it's hard for me to balance my time because when I get home from school, I take care of my daughter first until she goes to sleep and then that's the only time, I can start my assignments. Moreover, the student-mothers grabbed every opportunity to spend quality times with their children. **Student I** cited that "every time I came home from school, I always make sure that me and my daughter have time together. After doing my assignments, it's time to teach her. Sometimes, if I don't have a class, nothing important to do we bond together". **Student C** cited that "I have a time for my family, after school time I teach my son in his homework and cleaning at home". **Student H** said that "it is really hard to balance time for studies and time for children but I believe that if you really want to accomplish something, you will do everything for it. These findings were supported by the study of Bosch (2013) that the student – mothers championed these challenges by being organized with good time- management skills. The support of immediate surroundings like families, friends, especially partners or boyfriends were very critical for women in achieving their dreams in life particularly in finishing their education

5. Conclusions

The lived experiences of the participants in balancing and fulfilling their dual roles as students and mothers are both challenging and fulfilling. As students, the data revealed that the participants recognized the challenges and importance of education. The participants believed that the challenges they are facing now as students are just temporary. They are highly motivated to hurdle these successfully because finishing their education means the fulfillment of their family's dreams. They strongly believe that through this they will be able to provide a very promising and secure life for their children. The participants believed education made them more empowered and self-efficient and these give them a sense of pride that they once lost. Hence, the higher learning institutions must support these student-mothers by designing and providing academic and non-academic programs that suit their needs. Other student support services such as Guidance and Counselling Center should also design activities and programs that promote the welfare of these student-mothers like empowering single parents that will improve their coping skills, parenting seminars that will make them better and responsible parents. Lactation area in the clinic for the lactating mothers and other basic and support services. These non-academic supports will one way or another help the participants to achieve their dreams successfully.

As mothers, the participants understand that parenthood is a lifetime commitment. They believed that the responsibilities attached to it needs preparation for them to provide a better life for their children. More than financial assistance in paying their tuition fee and cost of child care, the participants need a good support system that includes the father of their children, parents, relatives, professors, friends and classmates that would accept, understand, and assist them holistically.

On a personal level, the lived experiences of the participants have profound impact on my life as a professor in the tertiary level. Having had the opportunity to hear the experiences of the participants as being students at the same time mothers has given me a sense of validation and affirmation for what I have already experienced in my graduate and post graduate education. I admire these participants for their courage in facing the concerns of their action and their determination to rise above the adversities by completing their education and fulfilling their dreams. I have learned so much from this study hence I would like to carry another research that is related with this.

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