Lived Experiences of Student in Distance Learning with a Mother Working Abroad

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Abstract:

This paper explored the lived experiences of students in distance learning with their mothers working abroad by utilizing the qualitative descriptive phenomenological method. The researcher focused on describing what is common among the participants as they encountered the phenomenon and reduced individual experiences to the descriptions of the universal essence. By suspending the preconceptions and experiences regarding the phenomenon and refraining from creating suppositions, the researcher bracketed herself out of the study, focusing on a specific topic sincerely. Criterion-based and snowball sampling methods were used to identify the twelve (12) students whose mothers are working abroad as the participants of this study. The data were collected using semi-structured face-to-face and online interviews. Following Creswell's approach, the data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The following are the three major themes that emerged from the study: (1) the personal display of resiliency virtue, (2) the ability to trade-off as part of being realistic, and (3) acting not in their age. However, in the study, it is difficult to ascertain whether there is a major effect of maternal absence in terms of a child's academic performance.

Keywords: *Absentee Motherhood, Distance Learning, Academic Performance, and Phenomenology*

Introduction

Distance learning is a type of formal education provided by an institution in which groups of students are geographically separated, and interactive telecommunications networks are utilized to connect students, resources, and instructors (Simonson, Schlosser, and Orellana, 2011). It involves acquiring information through either attending classes online, modular, or a combination of both modalities. The instructor and the instructional strategy/methods are absorbed into the learning materials which are intended to be utilized by the learner as a self-directed learning guide (Messo, 2014).

In distance learning modality, students spend much of their time at home connecting and interacting with their parents than with teachers. As a result, parents' involvement in students' remote learning is critical (Borup, Graham, & Davies, 2013). In a conventional face-to-face classroom setting, the teachers and administrators conduct protective and administrative activities to support and oversee the learning of the students. However, in distance learning, parents are required to assume though not all, but most of the teachers' responsibilities. While teachers in distance learning play the important role of being content providers and facilitators, parents assumed the responsibility by managing their children, guiding them in completing their lessons at home, supervising their online class activities to ensure that children are doing their part, and avoid social media's distractions (Hasler Waters & Leong, 2014).

Moreover, a study conducted by Lamb (2010) on gender differences in parental participation in a child's academic success reveals that even when both parents worked full-time, the father was less likely to be involved than the mother. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Blau and Hameiri (2012) about the comparison of parental involvement in the online class of their child. The result shows that the mother was involved a lot in the online learning of their child, she logged into the system, checked the progress, and sent many messages to inquire about the performance of her child in the online class triple the number of fathers does. In light of these findings, experts and policy-makers have raised questions and concerns about the mother's time spent outside the home or, more frequently, working overseas, and its impact on the child's scholastic development.

There were two opposing viewpoints in the previous literature presented on the influence of parental employment on the child's academic achievement. However, the more widely held belief is that a mother's absence from the home decreases both the number and quality of her connection with her children, including attention, guidance, affection, and academic support (Youn, Leon, & Lee, 2012).

Meanwhile, in the 2019 Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) Survey conducted by Mapa (2020), the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) undersecretary, the result shows that the estimated number of Filipinos who are working abroad was 2.2 million, and 56% of them were female which majority belonged to age group 30 to 34. They were employed as nurses and caretakers in hospitals and other health institutions, while others worked as salespeople and clerks, and yet more worked as domestic helpers. The result of the survey implies that many children have to live and deal the distance learning without their mother as it worked abroad. Recent investigations across disciplines have argued the consequences of the long-distance relationship between parents and children. While some papers presented the positive effects, others find negative impacts when parental involvement is lessened as a result of one or both parents are absent from home (Giannelli, & Mangiavacchi, 2010; Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014; Asis, 2006; Arguillas & Williams, 2010; and Antman, 2011).

Indeed, findings from various studies make the consequences of a long-distance relationship between parents and children especially on the child's academic endeavour remain ambivalent. What is interesting though is the fact that children are strongly affected and vulnerability levels increase when it is the mother who leaves and works abroad. Since, from the traditional gender ideologies, caregiving remains the primary responsibility of mothers and being the 'light of the home' is their ultimate role (UNICEF, 2004 and Asis et al. 2004). This claim was supported by a survey conducted by Save the Children (2006); Battistella and Conaco (1998); Jampaklay, (2006) as they reported that children tend to have poor academic performance when the mother is absent.

Although numerous studies have presented the effect of maternal absence on the development of their children, there is a dearth of research that examines the students' perception and coping mechanisms on distance learning with a mother working abroad. Thus, this study aimed to shed light on this research gap and intended to explore the student's lived experiences in distance learning with a mother working abroad.

Methodology

Research Design

Exploring student's perceptions is well suited for qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2016 and Patton, 2015). The phenomenological method was used in this study because it provides extensive descriptions of what the students have gone through and how they have dealt with distance learning while their mother is working abroad. In this phenomenological study, the researcher focused on describing what is common among the participants as they encountered the phenomenon and reduced individual experiences to the descriptions of the universal essence. By suspending the preconceptions and experiences regarding the phenomenon and refraining from creating suppositions, the researcher bracketed herself out of the study, focusing on a specific topic sincerely (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Patton 2015; and Moustakas, 1994).

Sampling Technique

Participants in this study were purposively selected using two sampling strategies: criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling method to guarantee that the participants have prior experience with the topic of interest and are qualified in the inclusion criteria formulated, namely: (a) student (b) age must range from thirteen (13) to eighteen (18) years old, (c) his/her mother works abroad for not less than three years and can articulate their lived experiences, and (d) have to be willing to engage in the intensive interview process, which also involved follow-up interviews. Besides, a snowball sampling method was also utilized by identifying ideal participants who fit the criteria for the study by asking knowledgeable people for referrals (Creswell & Poth, 2016 and Patton, 2002).

Data Gathering Procedures

The procedures of this phenomenological study offered the required rigor to ensure the study's credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Before the conduct of the study, the researcher invited the potential participants and parents/guardians to participate in the study and sent a Consent form via email. The participants and parents/guardians expressed commitment and willingness to participate in the study and signed the consent form, then the researcher and participants agreed on the schedule and mode of the interview whether online via video-conference application or face to face at the participants' site of preference.

Before the conduct of the interview, the researcher engaged in the essential process that characterizes a phenomenology, the *epoché*, or bracketing. This was done by "bracketing" the researcher's assumptions in order

to give the participants' perspectives a chance to be heard. The researcher wrote a detailed account of her life events and responded to the same questions as the participants. These written descriptions were treated but not included in the final thematic structure. This *epoché*, or bracketing, allowed the researcher to efficiently eliminate as much of her personal experiences as possible to provide a novel perspective on the issues at hand. (Creswell, 2013 and Moustakas, 1994).

The data were collected using a semi-structured online interview. The questions utilized in the interview were pilot-tested and translated into vernacular during the interview process for clear understanding. The questions were open-ended, intending to elicit more detailed descriptions of the concerned phenomenon as they arose. This method was utilized to guarantee that the researcher remains as close to the participants' perspectives as possible. The researcher was able to delve deeply into each participant's personal experience and identify themes or patterns that emerge from the dialogues by using general questions in complement to responses to open-ended questions. Furthermore, the researcher had to exert tremendous effort to remain focused on the experiences shared by the participants and refrain from analyzing the interviewee's personality or any other attribute.

The demographic profiles of participants were also obtained during the interview, namely: participant's name, name of parents and siblings, age, gender, number of siblings schooling, age of siblings schooling, the school where he/she is enrolled (private or public), economic status, occupation of father, occupation of mother abroad, educational attainment of both parents, instructional materials, and gadgets used in the distance learning. However, due to privacy issues, names associated with the participants changed to pseudonyms during the transcription process.

Each interview lasted around sixty (60) minutes and was recorded using two independent devices to maximize the chances of a good recording and a backup, with the approval of the participants. The researcher also took down notes during the interview to remember important non-verbal cues. Consequently, the researcher interviewed 12 participants and reaches the saturation point and no new themes emerged.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the synthesized phenomenological procedures suggested by Creswell (2013). The phases of analysis involved: (1) In the first phase, the researcher organized, prepared, and transcribed the entire audio recordings including field notes. Then the researcher re-read the transcript multiple times to obtain a general feeling about the whole content. (2) The second phase was memoing, in this process, the researcher extracted the significant statements that describe the phenomenon and formulated meanings by considering her personal views and reflections on the responses of each participant. (3) The coding process came next. The researcher assigned a code or category to each relevant unit of data, hence compressing the data. (4) The next phase was classifying, identifying, and interconnecting themes from the codes. (5) The results were then integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

In order to increase the rigor of the study, peer review or debriefing of the data and research process was conducted during multiple meetings to promote trustworthiness. The researcher also conducted the member-checking by approaching some of the participants a second time and re-read the transcript of their responses and asked confirmation and validation of the findings.

Results

The following were the three major themes that emerged from the study "Student's lived experiences in the distance learning with a mother working abroad":

1. Personal display of Resiliency Virtue

Both learner and mother who are working abroad displayed resiliency in coping with the challenges brought by their separation. Resilience, in this regard, is one of the key characteristics that Filipinos normally associate themselves with, as many Filipinos face poverty and poor employment opportunities. The difficult situation encountered by many Filipinos in the Philippines requires them to become resolute in adopting and coping up with the situation. Hence, two of the admirable characters of being a Filipino are being independent and resourceful and these characters surfaced out as part of the experiences of mothers working abroad and children learning in distance education separated from their parents.

1.1 Being independent in complying with academic requirements

Students in distance learning without their mother supporting them encounter a tricky balance of being academically independent but still trying to remain connected with their teachers for their guidance. Some of the participants (students) are well adept at the skills needed to be academically successful, such as study skills and time management, some are just learning these skills and have yet to master them as they deal the distance learning with the support of their subject teachers. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

"I usually don't ask for their (parents) help because they are too busy. Aside from being busy, I don't want to bother them because I know they are working hard for our family" (S2).

"I just do my academic requirements on my own even if I'm struggling. Fortunately, most of my teachers are approachable and always available so if some topics or concepts are difficult to understand, I would consult them through chat or text" (S4).

"My mom worked abroad for 7 years and since then I learned how to be independent and do things my way" (S1).

"As for the distance learning, yes this is maybe challenging for others because they have to learn on their own, a good thing I am used to it. I mean this is an advantage on my part because ever since I usually do my assignment or projects without the help of my mama (mother) and if it's a bit difficult, I asked help from my teachers" (S10).

1.2 Being resourceful in complying with academic requirements

One of the valuable things that participants have learned in this situation is to be resourceful. Participants demonstrated distinctive resourcefulness in finding ways to overcome challenges and utilize available technology resources to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes. This is evident in some of the statements of the students below:

"I usually watched videos from YouTube especially on the step-by-step processes of   making any projects or even solving mathematics problems" (S11).

"I downloaded videos of some science-related lectures on YouTube. Most of the videos I've watched, gave me a better understanding of the concept than reading books or modules provided by our teachers" (S2).

Through the use of technologies and social media, participants in this study informally learned new information by searching on Google or accessing trusted, reliable, and credible online sources.

"As of this time, her (mother) absence doesn't matter anymore, because I can already utilize Google in complying with my assignments. But I have to be critical in checking the legitimacy of the data source before considering it" (S1).

"One has to be zealous in browsing the internet websites like YouTube and google because some answers for the activity are found there" (S10).

2. The ability to trade-off as part of being realistic

Children and mothers are showing sensible and practical ideas of what can be achieved or expected from their situation. Similar to being resilient which is discussed earlier, being realistic is a Filipino character traceable to the difficulties Filipinos have to endure for an individual to enjoy a flourishing life in the Philippines. Some of the families in the country are not economically blessed so that basic services delivery is not ideal and for an individual to flourish, he/she has to trade-off by sacrificing less important concerns to address more pressing needs.

In this study mothers and students shared their trade-off experiences to address their concerns realistically.

2.1 Maternal presence is substituted with her financial support.

Children's education is undeniably one of the reasons why mothers opted to work abroad. However, her maternal absence in the family is substituted by her financial support through her remittances. Due to limited opportunities for work in the Philippines the mother traded off her physical presence with her children for financial support which is necessary for the family to survive. These emanated from statements like:

"I can say that, although she's not around, she provided me with all these gadgets and internet access, I can research and seek help from the internet" (S6).

"As long as she can provide me with what I need, especially this time that I needed to have laptop and cell phone or iPad for my online class" (S5).

2.2 Maternal support, in terms of the academic needs of the child, is done virtually

Using technology such as cell phones and laptops through video calls or social media updates, the mother and the student sustain communication. In this way, the feeling of sadness and incompleteness brought about by physical distance is lessened. This would also maintain close ties between mother and student by talking and updating each other about their daily lives especially on the student's academic performance. For instance, the students conveyed:

"Even though my mother is not with us physically, she can still help me with my academics, in answering modules, virtually" (S9).

"My mother monitored my activities and even checked my assignments. She always made sure that I submitted my module on time" (S8).

"She's even stricter right now with my academics and schedule of activities unlike before without Covid- 19 pandemic and free to go to school because I can make excuses" (S6).

2.3 Maternal responsibilities are substituted by Grandparents and Aunties

The positive roles played by the extended family also helps in alleviating the negative impacts of the absence of the mother especially on the student's academic performance while dealing with the distance learning approach. Students narrated their experiences with their close relatives:

"It's not easy, but thankfully my grandmother and my aunt were always there to guide me and help me academically" (S5)

"My aunt is a teacher in one of the public schools and she helps me in my academics and I would easily understand the topics with my aunt's explanations" (S7).

"I have cousins who sometimes help me with my projects and other major requirements" (S1).

3. Acting not in their age

Acting not in their age was manifested among students with mothers working abroad. Childhood and teenage years are delicate stages of one's growth and it requires guidance especially from the mothers. Taking care of the child including their academic concerns is culturally assigned to mothers and this is a problem when the mother is absent. Besides, Filipinos are giving so much regard to the family that is why an incomplete family setup is a major issue for a growing individual.

Children with mothers working abroad face situations more than their age can handle and this concern surfaced out in the study.

3.1 Burdened with the concerns of younger siblings because of distant mother

Participants/students are sometimes overburdened with the extra work specifically taking good care of their younger siblings aside from accomplishing their academic concerns. Students verbalized that:

"Very tiring on my part because I have three siblings who are still young and still in primary in elementary. I need to help them first finish answering their modules before I can start doing my homework and answering the questions in the module" (S12).

"...exhausted, if only my mother is with us right now and she's the one who takes good care of my siblings, I think it would be easier for me to manage my time and can do better with my studies" (S3).

3.2 Disappointed with the maternal absence

Even though, participants/students are well provided and supported yet they are still protesting regarding the absence of their mother especially that their situation deviates from the normal family set-up projected in the mass media where mothers are helping their children in accomplishing academic requirements. These emanated from statements like:

"Of course, there are times that I felt so lonely and disappointed, if only that my mother is with us, I may not get a lower score in some of my assignments and quizzes" (S12).

"Sometimes I felt jealous of some of my classmates where their mother is always there beside them, guiding them and helping them in answering their modules" (S7).

Discussions

From the foregoing emergent themes: the personal display of resiliency virtue, ability to trade-off as part of being realistic, and acting not in their age, it is difficult to ascertain whether there is a major effect of maternal absence in terms of child's academic performance. Filipino values like strong familial relationships help children with mothers working abroad cope with the academic requirements as they have willing grandparents and aunties who are willing to assist and fill the role of the absentee mother (Asis & Ruiz-Marave, 2013; Clifton-Sprigg, 2019; Biavaschi, Giulietti, & Zimmermann, 2015). Furthermore, the benefits of internet connectivity help children of mothers working abroad navigate the academic challenges of distance learning specifically in terms of access to information (Peng & Wong, 2013; Shahibi & Rusli, 2017; Desmal, 2017; and Khan, Wohn, & Ellison, 2014). On one hand, the child is no longer depend so much on his/her mother in answering or complying with the requirements set in their learning modules as there are websites that can help them find the answers provided that the children will exercise their resourcefulness. On the other hand, internet connectivity makes parents easily accessible to their children due to the availability of social media websites. In fact, distant parents can monitor their children virtually (Clifton-Sprigg, 2019; Madianou, 2016; Peng, & Wong, 2013; Ariate, Cruz, Dimaculangan, & Tibayan, 2015; Alampay, Alampay, & Raza, 2013 and 2012).

However, it is notable that physical presence cannot be substituted with a virtual presence. The financial support that mothers working abroad can provide technological gadgets so that children can enjoy the benefits of twenty-first-century information technological advancements but still material blessings are not sufficient to answer all the needs of the children (Edillon, 2008). The physical presence of the mother still plays a vital role in the lives of the children especially in terms of emotional support as their children cope up with academic requirements under distance learning modality. Children of mothers working abroad would likely consider their situation deviating from the normal as other children do and comply with learning tasks with mothers helping them physically (Madianou, 2016). Nevertheless, participants of the study look at their situation realistically or a viewpoint that accepts trade-offs to enjoy more urgent concerns. For children who are participants in this study, their experiences are not childlike but circumstances force them to be more mature.

Conclusion

In the course of knowing the student's lived experiences in distance learning with a mother working abroad specifically on the academic performance, the value of the strong family relationship, which is one of the highly esteemed Filipino values, is being emphasized. The roles of the mothers not only in guiding their children to comply with academic requirements in the distance learning modality have been substituted by other members of the extended family like grandparents and aunties which is working well in the Philippine setup as Filipinos find it normal living with extended family members in the household.

Moreover, technological advancements in terms of communication and easy access to information help a lot especially among students with a mother working abroad. The Internet makes learning less dependent on the

guidance of adults as many websites are offering detailed and informative content on how to do things and learn new skills. Likewise, communication today is less expensive which is why a child with a mother working abroad can communicate more often to their parents as if they are close to each other.

Finally, the previous narratives of the student of the mother working abroad going astray due to the absence of the mother should be rethink as the study shows that children are coping well. Participants of the study for example cope up with their situation by their display of Resiliency Virtue or showing toughness amidst the difficulties. Moreover, the Ability to trade-off as part of being realistic makes the situation more bearable. The situation in the country is not ideal that is why it is typical to prioritize things. Some values have to be traded to enjoy more pressing needs. In doing so, children/participants of the study are perceived to be acting not in their age as these children navigate the complexities of their situation.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are presented:

1. The value of maintaining strong family relationships remains important in the twenty-first-century context and this value should be emphasized especially among younger generations as the study shows that challenges of child and mother separation due to economic problems can be addressed if other members of the family will take the role of the mother.

2. The comfort of twenty-first-century technological advancements eased the challenges of separation of families due to economic concerns that is why internet connectivity should be considered as one of the basic needs of a Filipino.

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