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Challenges and opportunities of self-supporting students during pandemic: A phenomenological study

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Abstract--This study intends to explore on the lived experiences of self-supporting vendor students under modular modality. Employing qualitative-descriptive phenomenological design, specifically descriptive phenomenology that focuses on the study of the study of experience from the perception of the individual. Semi structured interviews were conducted to gather the data. Data analysis was done using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method to interpret the data. The study revealed that financial challenges in the family have made them self-supporting student vendors. Being a self-supporting student vendors have developed a sense of resourcefulness as they strive to find means in sustaining themselves in their studies. Their ambitions in life is what made them endure hardships and go on in life. Modular approach in learning made their studies a bit lighter since they can choose the time when to study.

Keywords--pandemic, self-supporting students, challenges, opportunities, qualitative, modular approach, phenomenological study.

Introduction

Working while studying to support yourself is never easy. Studies requires a lot of time, and working while studying requires more time and effort compared to regular student. The COVID-19 pandemic brought drastic changes to all aspects in society. One of which is prohibiting the young ones from going out under the issuance of proclamation no. 929 dated March 16, 2020 also known as Enhanced Community Quarantine. This scenario brought challenges among student vendors who do work to sustain themselves in order to study. Under modular modality, students still needs financial support in answering their modules in the absence of the teacher explaining the lesson.

Working while studying has both positive and negative effect to students (Jewell, 2014). For one, it gives stress due to the many things a student has to meet in both studies and work. However, on a positive note, it made students resilient and resourceful. The negative impact on working while studying lies on the relevance of work intensity on academic performance, showing that a negative impact is found when students are employed on full-time jobs (Caldwell, 2017). But, on the other hand (Irfan, 2104) mentioned that working gives independence, training, and experience to the students. Being a working student does not make one a low academic performer in class. (Lang, 2012) shows that there are no discernable difference in the grades of working students and non-working students. The only difference that the working students show compared to non-working students is the anxiety symptoms and increased stress (Mounsey & Diekoff, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic has placed these students at risk and vulnerable (Tsurugano, Nishikitani, Inoue, Yano, 2021).

In the Philippines wherein many families live within the poverty line, many students resolved to find initiative to pursue their studies. Literature cited above shows the positive and negative effects of being a working student. However, no studies that focuses into the actual experiences of working students under modular modality, the challenges they survived in the new mode of learning, their academic performance and the opportunities they got out of the many challenges brought by the pandemic.

While every aspect in the world affected by this pandemic is trying to survive, the educational system in the Philippines is one of which. Different learning modalities are being employed in the public and private institutions. The Department of education choose to implement the Distance learning modality through modules. Modular learning as defined by Under Secretary Alain Del Pascua is a form of distance learning that uses Self-Learning Modules (SLM) based on the most essential learning competencies. Modular learning also emerged as the most preferred learning mode in most secondary students. According to (Pascua, Sulong Edukalidad, Public affairs Servie, 2020) learners cited the lack of available gadgets and internet connection as the main reasons why they preferred modular learning over online learning. Most of the working students also opted modular modality due to limited time (LESF, 2020). In this new learning mode, how are these students working as vendors dedicated their time in work and in their studies?

The minimal researches done on this topic has made the researcher the will to explore on the lived experiences of self-supporting student vendors under modular modality, the challenges and opportunities and their way of coping under modular modality.

Research Objectives

This study was being conducted in order to identify the challenges and opportunities of self-supporting students during the pandemic.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

The current global health crisis has severely impacted not just people's health but also the global economy and financial markets. Data and reports suggest a major fall in income, employment rates, transportation services, and production industries as a result of the global pandemic that affected almost all countries, according to the Public Health in 2020. It's evident that most people overestimated the dangers of the virus spreading further. Because it is evident that this situation could still endure for a few years longer, aggressive transnational solutions are needed to defend public health and the global economy (Pak, Oyelola, Adegboye, Adekunle, Rahman, McBryde and Eisen, 2020).

It was on March 11, 2020 when the WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic considering the number of cases which totaled over three million and resulted in 207,973 deaths in various parts of the world. The virus has an impact not just on people's health but also on the economy. These incidents have resulted in a significant drop in economic activity, resulting in decreased productivity, loss of life, an increase in unemployment as a result of business closures, a slower flow of goods, products, and services, and the annihilation of the tourism industry. All of these worries are extremely serious, and they will undoubtedly necessitate close coordination among global leaders in order to handle the issues (Pak. et. al 2020).

Just like with other countries, the economic growth of the Philippines slowed in the year 2020. For the first time since 1999, the country's GDP fell into negative territory, with one of the steepest contractions in the region (ASEAN). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines, according to Mendoza (2021), was one of the East Asia's most high-powered economies. Strong consumer demand, a vibrant labor market, and remittances from abroad are all important factors in the Philippines' economic development.

It was predicted by the government that there will be a minor recovery in 2021. However, some analysts were concerned about a shaky recovery due to the country's prolonged lockdown, insufficient actions to resolve the concerns with long term solutions, and or the inability to alter to a more efficient approach. In the case of the Philippines, when an outbreak threatens to overwhelm the country's public health system, it would resort to impose draconian mobility restrictions across the broad sections of the different cities of the country.

The world health crisis caused the economy of the Philippines to reach its lowest point since World War II, with GDP falling by 9.5 percent in 2020. It is undeniably the worst loss since records began in 1947, and the first time the economy has dropped since 1988 when it shrank by 0.5 percent. It showed that the GDP went as low as -16.9 percent in the next quarter of the 2020, when the tightest lockdown was applied. (Future Learn, 2021)

The data of the PSA show that the yearly unemployment rate in the year 2020 was 10.3 percent or an equivalent to 4.5 million unemployed Filipinos. The figures marked as the highest annual jobless rate ever recorded, dating back to

April 2005. Unfortunately, the issue appears to be getting worse. The PSA estimated that nearly 4 millions of Filipinos were unemployed in January 2021. In January 2021, the number of underemployed – employed people who stated a desire for extra hours of work – is predicted to be 6.6 million, or 16 percent of the total employed population, which is higher than the 3.8 million unemployed in October 2020 and the 2.4 million unemployed in January 2020. The figures that show the rate of underemployment is higher than the 14.4 percent that was recorded in October 2020 and the 14.8 percent rate that was recorded in January 2020.

People coming from the different nations with different educational levels, socioeconomic class, and genders have been severely touched by the issue of pandemic. The same cannot be true for the consequences, which have disproportionately harmed the most vulnerable members of society. For example, the loss of a job would have a significant impact on the life and studies of working students who rely on part-time income to get by. They were among the people who were most hard hit by the pandemic's effects. Despite the harsh circumstances imposed by COVID-19 pandemic, our working students are determined to complete their education. While there are some of the students who benefit from the ease of a reliable internet connection and gadgets due to the shift in the delivery of instruction of most schools, others are not so fortunate especially those who still need to work to earn to be able to survive online classes.

This pandemic, according to Antipolo's report (2021), affects the entire country, with education being no exception. As a result of the Philippine government's lockdowns in response to this massive educational crisis, certain schools around the country have closed. That is why, CHED emphasized the need of HIEs to provide an alternative in lieu of the traditional face-to-face learning setting through an accessible flexible learning and other options that are available. As noticed, working students were really the ones affected this time as they also battled to meet their daily needs.

It was found out by Aucejo et al. in the year 2020 that working students in US suffered a 37 percent drop in weekly hours work and a 37 percent drop in revenue. Also, data shows 40 percent of learners reported losing jobs and offers, internships, and 61 percent showing a loss in income from a member of a family. According to GW Hatchet (2021), students working during the pandemic struggled to balance studies and labor. As a result of the outbreak, some working students noted that their professions had increased their stress and responsibility, pushing them to adjust to new "chaotic" environments with additional safety precautions. They said the additional responsibilities prompted them to ask their professors for assignment extensions so that they could finish their education while working shifts. Students in vital occupations said the pandemic has tested their ability to juggle education and their jobs. For example, a student studying psychology has had to balance employment at a local ice cream shop with her uncle's legal profession as an office assistant since classes shifted online. She claimed she struggled with time management because she had to schedule her education around her employment schedule (Antipolo, 2021).

Soria et al. (2020) added that based on studies, data show a number of working students who were struggling more than those of the non-working ones in terms of the financial aspect. Due to the pandemic, the world health crisis has resulted to lost wages from family members, lost wages on or off campus employment, and also higher living costs of people. Working students are nearly twice as likely as regular students to be concerned about their school funding. Because they must juggle employment and school, they also take fewer academic units. Working students were compared to non-working students in the study. Working students are more likely to have a higher risk of mental health disorders, have more difficulty transitioning to online learning, face challenges related to a lack of sufficient study spaces and the gadgets needed to complete learning activities, and are less likely to attend scheduled virtual classes, according to the study. With these difficulties, the topic of how working students manage and balance their time with academic obligations remained a pressing concern.

According to Antipolo (2021) it's important to note that the challenges of balancing education and work during the pandemic are vastly different from the challenges that working students faced when things were still normal. Through interviews and surveys, the study will try to figure out where the determined working students are today and how they balance education and job. This also reveals working students' coping mechanisms for dealing with stress and pressure while learning. The struggles of today's modern-day inspirations must be taken seriously. As a result, this research looked into the job status and lives of working students during the world health crisis. It is an essential topic to bring up during this difficult time since the problems that working students face in balancing academic pressures and work strains deserve serious consideration. Only by listening to them and analyzing their situations, conditions, and obstacles can their predicament be truly comprehended.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research, specifically using descriptive phenomenology. (Glesne, 2016) states that qualitative research is a research design that puts premium or high value on people's thinking or point of view conditioned by their traits. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research, which is concerned, with the study of experience from the perception of the individual (Hale, 2013). In this study, the researcher have conducted an in-depth interview to explore the lived experiences of the working students under modular modality.

Ten (10) key informants had voluntarily participated in the study who were purposively chosen using the following inclusion criteria (1. Senior high school student vendor; 2. Currently enrolled in a National High school for the school year 2020-2021; 3. Is a vendor; 4. Self- supporting in his or her studies). Excluded as participants are regular students and have their parents or relatives supporting them in their studies.

Using the semi-structured interview questionnaire, digital recorders were also utilized to allow consistent transcriptions. Note-taking was done to write down any observations made during the interview. Then researcher transcribed and typed the data into a computer file and made descriptive analysis later on.

Data Analysis

The information gathered have undergo descriptive interpretation and data analysis of the study. Common themes about their struggles and experiences were analyzed. The common themes formed will be used to give meaning of self-supporting vendor students about the struggles that they are experiencing in doing two work at same time and their experiences in answering the modules in this new normal. All information are based on the recorded interview and are coded using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method.

Ethical Consideration

In employing the ethical consideration of the study, the researcher made sure that the participants will not be named in any part of the study. A self-supporting student will not be mandated to respond in this study, it is indeed a voluntary one. An informed consent was also considered and given prior to the interview. Recorded interview was kept safe and will only be accessed by the researcher and will be disposed a year after. Member checking was also done, that is, presenting the outcome to the interviewees if it is reflective of their experiences.

Results and Discussion

On the Challenges of the Self-supporting Students on their Modular Learning during the Pandemic After the analysis of the transcription, 22 significant statements were identified and given corresponding formulated meanings. On these, one common theme was identified as a challenge to the participants where they stated that financial challenges of the family make it difficult for them to go to school.

When the parents' income is hardly enough to meet the needs of the family, it is harder for them to support their children in their studies. As key informant A shared:

“Mahirap talaga kami. Amg kita ng mga magulang ko ay kulang pa nga para sa pangangailangan ng pamilya. Kaya lagi nilang sinasabi na kaung nais naming na mag-aral, magsisikap nalang kami”. (We are poor. My parents income is hardly enough for the needs of the family. So our parents told us that if we want to study, we have to work hard.) Analogous to the study of Saavedra & Barredo (2020), family's financial status was one of the factors that lead to the poor writing skills of the elementary learners. Parents' time were devoted to their livelihood in order for them to provide the needs of their children thus resulting to the absence of follow-up and support to the academic aspect of their children, Key Informant A).

When parents find it difficult themselves to sustain the studies of the children, the children resolved to find ways in which they can sustain themselves in their studies. Key informant D shared the experience of asking for money from the parents:

“Sa tuwing hihingi ako ng pera para sa pag-aaral, sasabihin lang ng tatay ko na mahirap kami kaya mas mabuting magtrabaho para makatulong kaysa mag-aral.” (Every time I ask for money for my studies, my father would tell me that we are poor and it is better if we work than study, Key informant D).

Key informant F also shared an experience of coming from family who did not support at all:

“Naghiwalay ang mga magulang ko at iniwan kaming apat na magkapatid. Bilang panganay humanap ako ng paraan upang maitaguyod ang sarili ko at mga kapatid ko. At nag-aral na rin ako para sa kinabukasan namin.” (Our parents are separated. Being the eldest, I have to work to support me and my siblings and I also studied for our future, Key Informant F).

Due to financial challenges in the family. Parents tend to discourage children from going to school. As shared by key informant G:

“Huwag na kayong mag-aral. Kami nga hindi. Mas mabuting magtrabaho nalang kayo upang makatulong sa pamilya.” (Do not study anymore. We did not even studied before. It is better if you work so that you can help the family, Key Informant G).

Also, Key Informant I shared how they are pushed to sustain themselves in their studies.

“Kulang talaga ang pera na makuha naming araw-araw. Kaya sa kung nais ninyo na mag-aral dapat tutulong din kayo maghahanap ng pera.” (We don't have sufficient money. If you want to study, then find means, Key respondent I).

Based on the key informants' sharing, the lack of financial security in the family is what pushes children to find their own means of sustaining themselves to continue in their studies. Financial challenges also tends parents to somehow discourage children to go to school and instead do help them make a living.

On the Opportunities of the Self-supporting Students on their Modular Learning during the Pandemic

After analyzing the transcription, there are three themes developed arising from the participants' statements. According to the self-supporting students, during the pandemic, they were able to develop resourcefulness (theme 1) which they consider as an opportunity amidst the pandemic.

The children coming from family who are financially challenged are pushed to their limits in finding means to sustain themselves in their studies. Hence, at a young age they thought of ways on how to earn money themselves. As the key

informants have shared, they thought of different ways on how to sustain themselves to study and at the same time help their family to meet the needs.

Key informant B:

“Noong una nasa elementarya pa ako tumutulong ako sa lola ko magbenta. Hanggang sa natuto ako. At ngayon wala na siya, ako na nagpapatuloy sa tindahan niya”. (When I was in elementary, I used to help my grandmother in selling. Until I learned how to do it myself. Now that she is gone, it is me who continued the work.)

Key informant C:

“Nagsimula ito sa pagsasama ko sa mga kakilala na may tindahan. Nagbibenta sila. At yon naisip ko magtitinda na rin kaya ako para magkapera para sa pamilya at sa pag-aaral”. (It all started when I tried going with our neighbor’s store. Then I thought of doing it myself so I can help my family and sustain myself in my studies.

Key informant E:

“Sa pagsasama ko sa mga kakilala na nagbibenta, naisip ko magandang gawin kasi magkapera. Ngunit wala akong puhunan kasi mahirap talaga kami. Kaya noong una, kumukuha ako ng pangtinda sa kapitbahay naming hanggang sa nakaipon ako ng pera na sapat makapagsimula ako kaya heto nagtintinda ako habang nag-aaral din”. (Since I used to go with my friends who sell different products akong our area, I thought that it is a good way to earn money. But I don’t have the capital to start my own. At the start, I helped in our neighbor’s store then kept my money until came up with my own capital that is enough to sustain myself in my studies.)

Key informant H:

“Marami talaga nagtitinda sa pamayanan naming. Kaya naisip ko noon paano kaya kung magtitinda na rin ako. Sa hirap ng buhay, wala akong pera sa puhunan kaya sa tiyo ko ako sumasama na magtinda. Iniipon ko ang makukuha kong pera para na rin sa pamilya at pag-aaral ko”. (Most of the people in our community are doing business, usually selling. So I thought of doing the same. Due to poverty, I can’t start it on my own. So I went to my uncle and helped him in his store, until I was able to come up with my own capital.)

Key informant G:

“Dahil sa hirap ng buhay, napilitan akong mag-isip ng paraan upang maitaguyod ang sarili at makatulong na rin sa pamilya. Napansin kong Malaki ang potensyal ng pagtitinda sa pamayanan naming kaya humanap ako ng paraan upang makapagpaninda”. (Due to poverty, I was pushed to find means for myself and for my family. I noticed how selling have helped most of the people in our community so that is why I am doing it now.)

It can be understood from the sharing of the key informants' that their life is not easy. Therefore they resolved to finding means at a young age to help their family and also sustain themselves in their studies. Even in the midst of scarcity in financial resources to have their own business, they find their means to get what they have foreseen to be essential. Thus, it clearly shown that they have developed resourcefulness.

Another opportunity that the self-supporting students discovered in the modular learning is that pandemic pushes them hard to finish their studies (theme 2)

Despite poverty and other challenges in life, these students pushed through in their studies. It is evident in literatures that working while studying is a challenge. Key informants have shared these challenges. A, C, D G

Key informant A:

... *"kulang sa pahinga pero titiisin para sa aking pangarap na maihaon ang pamilya sa kahirapan"*. (we lack time to rest but we endure because I have my ambition of helping my family)

Key informant C:

... *"kadalasan pagod na sa pag-uwi at hindi na makapokus sa mga dapat sasagutan na modyul tapos halos walang oras sa pag-aaral. Ngunit nangangarap akong baling araw maging accountant ako kaya patuloy lamang"*. (Usually I go home tired and can't focus in my studies anymore. But I want to be an accountant someday so that's why I have to continue in my studies.)

Key informant D:

"Pangarap kong may magandnag trabaho kaya mag-aral kahit mahirap". (it is my ambition to have a decent job even if we are poor now)
The rest of the key informants have shared that their ambition is just but simple. It is to help their family from poverty. There are times when they are not certain as to what to do but they just go on working while studying as no one have ever gone wrong by studying.

Key informant G:

... *"aral lang ako kahit hindi ako sigurodo sa kinabukasan. Ang alam ko lang maganda ang kinahinatnan ng nag-aaral. Baka matupad ko rin ang pangarap ko para sa sarili at pamilya"*. (I just study even if the future is very uncertain. What I know is that those who study have good future. Maybe someday I will be able to achieve my ambition for myself and fro my family.

It can be understood from their sharing that these children really kept and ambition in their hearts. Because of that reason, they choose to endure the hardship life brought to them and continue to believe that if they just continue, they will be able to get their hearts desire. The same thought was expressed in the

study of Saavedra & Karanain (2022), that despite the mismatch of the respondents' first language with the language used as medium of instruction, they still manifested a positive attitude towards the use of the language of their belief on the importance of learning and using the Chabacano language.

The final theme that was developed out of the transcription stated that modular mode of learning made the working students' studies more manageable (theme 3)

Student vendors do their work in daytime and then attend to their studies during night class. When the pandemic happened, schools were closed and modular approach in learning was implemented by the Department of Education. This mode of learning have helped them manage work and studies. As explicitly explained in the DepEd Order no. 12 s. 2020 on the implementation of the Alternative Modalities during Pandemic, learners are given the privilege in terms of their schedule where they can choose the best time in answering their modules or capslet (Sandal, Saavedra, Madrazo & Ramos, 2022).

Key informant B:

“Mas makapag-aral ako kasi makapagpili ako ng araw kung kalian ako magsasagot ng mudyol. Kadalasan ginagawa ko ito sa mga araw na medyo mahina ang benta”. (I can study better because I can choose a day hen to answer my modules. Usually I dot it on days when selling is a bit low).

Key informant J:

“Nagustuhan koi to kasi kung mahirapan ako, makapag search o makapagpatulong ako sa mga aralin ko tapos magpipili pa ako ng araw kung kalian ako magsasagot”. (I like it better because if I don't know the lesson, I can search in the internet or ask help from someone).

Key informant E

“Nakakapagod pa rin dahil sa dami ng sasagutan ngunit mas mabuti nalang dahil hindi sapilitan ang tiyak na oras kung kalian ako mag-aral”. (It is still tiring because there are plenty to answer but I still find it better because I can choose the time when to study.)

Key informant H:

“Para sa akin mas magaan siya kung ihambing sa klase noon kasi walang maraming babayaran”. (For me it is better than face to face class because there are nothing to pay)

Their sharing have given us the idea that modular approach have helped the student vendors lighten in way that they can manage their time better in work and in studies. Financially, it is also better since there are nothing to pay unlike when it was face to face when there are projects that needs to be paid from time to time.

The self-supporting student vendors' are doing it due to financial challenges that their family is facing. When the family's income is just enough for food, no spare money for children's education, the children who would like to pursue their education would resolve to ways of supporting themselves. Being a self-supporting student vendor builds a sense of resourcefulness among students. The experience of findings ways to sustain their studies made look for resources on their own and as a result builds a sense of being resourceful at a young age. Despite the challenges in being a self-supporting students, it is their ambition that made them keep going and move on with life. The modular approach adopted by the department of education have helped these self-supporting student vendors manage their time in work and in studies better when compared to the face to face classes. With modular approach, students are free to choose the time when to do the module. Most of them makes sure that they do their studies on days when selling is not too high.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Financial challenges in the family have made them self-supporting student vendors. Being a self-supporting student vendor has developed a sense of resourcefulness as they strive to find means in sustaining themselves in their studies. Their ambitions in life are what made them endure hardships and go on in life. Modular approach in learning made their studies a bit lighter since they can choose the time when to study.

The findings portray implication among parents, the local government and the Department of Education. Parents must be responsible enough to meet the needs of the family and the children especially education. It is their main responsibility to have their children educated. Second is the local government unit. It is important for them to be aware and do actions to help those students who are vendors. It is best to have programs that would help them meet their needs in pursuing their education. Lastly, the Department of Education. The department must have to be sensitive enough in giving projects and activities that are costly, making the students look for means to provide themselves in sustaining their education. The department must be pro-poor in order to lessen the number of students who are supporting themselves.

Based on the findings, this study recommends that the Department of Education should look into the challenges of the self-supporting students and provide programs that could help self-supporting students. In the same way, the government may look for further means of better distributing the 4Ps allowance in a way that families should use it wisely.

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