

Lived Experiences of Student Mothers in Balancing Motherhood and Academic Pursuits: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Balancing the demands of motherhood and academic pursuits presents significant challenges for student-mothers but also fosters personal growth and resilience. This study investigates the lived experiences, coping strategies, and evolving perspectives of student-mothers enrolled in Criminology programs as they navigate the dual responsibilities of education and parenthood. Utilizing a phenomenological research design, the study was conducted at a Higher Education Institution in Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines, involving ten student-mothers selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Participants were actively enrolled in the Criminology program and concurrently fulfilling their maternal roles. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Six key themes emerged: (1) Juggling the Demands of Motherhood and Student Life, (2) Struggles with Time and Energy Management, (3) Pressures from Financial and Caregiving Responsibilities, (4) Balancing Roles through Faith, Support, and Strategic Planning, (5) Redefining Success, and (6) Building Resilience. The findings highlight the everyday struggles faced by student-mothers, including the constant negotiation between academic and parental obligations. Moreover, the experience of pursuing higher education reshaped their perceptions of both motherhood and education—viewing academic achievement not only as a personal milestone but as a critical investment in their children's future. To manage their dual roles, participants relied heavily on faith, familial support, careful planning, and an evolving understanding of success rooted in resilience rather than traditional measures of achievement. Nonetheless, they continued to grapple with significant challenges, particularly in managing limited time and energy, as well as financial and caregiving pressures. The study concludes that student-mothers exhibit extraordinary perseverance and adaptability. It recommends that higher education institutions implement comprehensive support mechanisms to better accommodate and empower student-mothers, thereby enhancing their academic success and overall well-being.

Keywords: Academic Pursuits; Coping Strategies; Dual Roles; Educational Challenges; Higher Education; Motherhood; Parental Responsibilities; Lived Experiences; Phenomenological Study; Student Mothers; Time Management; Work-life Balance.

1. Introduction

Motherhood profoundly shapes a woman's emotional, psychological, and social identity, encompassing not only nurturing and sacrifice but also significant challenges, especially when combined with academic pursuits (Delgado-Herrera et al., 2024; Khan & Brooks, 2023). For young mothers, balancing education and family life demands resilience, time management, and emotional strength (Modak et al., 2023; Patel & Zhang, 2024). Globally, teenage pregnancy remains a pressing issue, with approximately 21 million births annually among girls aged 15–19, predominantly in developing countries (WHO, 2021; García-Ramírez et al., 2023). It perpetuates cycles of poverty, health risks, and educational disadvantage. In the Philippines, teenage pregnancy rates are among the highest in Southeast Asia, with about 15% of girls aged 15–19 having given birth (PSA, 2021; Pérez et al., 2020; Cruz & Villanueva, 2021). Locally, these trends are mirrored, with municipal data reporting that 12% of births in 2020 were to mothers aged 19 and below, signaling an urgent need for targeted interventions (Alcantara et al., 2019; Labrador & Reyes, 2021). Efforts to address teenage pregnancy often face barriers such as cultural stigma and insufficient outreach, despite the implementation of educational programs (Santos, 2022). Balancing motherhood and education presents a complex, deeply personal challenge that is often overlooked in policy and academic settings. Understanding the lived experiences of student-mothers is crucial to fostering inclusive support systems within higher education institutions (Mendez et al., 2022; Li & Thompson, 2022). Research shows that student-mothers often pursue education to improve their family's future, but encounter emotional strain, time

conflicts, and societal pressures (Villaflor et al., 2020; Robinson & Garcia, 2022; Hillier, 2021). Effective support systems—such as family assistance, flexible academic schedules, and mental health services—are critical for their academic success and well-being (Smith, 2023; Morales et al., 2021; López et al., 2022). However, a significant knowledge gap remains, particularly regarding young student-mothers in the Philippine context, especially those pursuing demanding fields like Criminology. Existing studies often overlook their specific struggles and coping mechanisms. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the dual experiences of motherhood and education among student-mothers.

1.1. Study Objectives

This study explored how student-mothers experience and navigate the challenges of balancing their academic responsibilities and motherhood. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) How do student-mothers make sense of their experiences in balancing academic responsibilities and motherhood? (2) What challenges do student-mothers faced in managing bot roles? (3) What coping strategies do student-mothers used to manage both academic and parenting responsibilities?

2. Methods

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of student-mothers enrolled in Criminology programs. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Heidegger and Gadamer, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses not only on describing experiences but also on interpreting the meanings individuals assign to them (van Manen, 2016). This approach was particularly suited to the study's aim of understanding how student-mothers navigate and make sense of their intertwined roles as both students and parents. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to present experiences as they are, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpretation and contextualization, acknowledging that meaning is shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Finlay, 2011). Emphasizing the "insider perspective" (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011), this methodology provided a nuanced understanding of the participants' academic challenges, parenting responsibilities, coping mechanisms, and evolving sense of self. Through this lens, the study delved into the emotional and psychological landscapes of student-mothers, uncovering how they interpreted societal expectations, managed stigma, and negotiated institutional barriers (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). The interpretive approach allowed for a richer, more layered understanding of the resilience and agency demonstrated by these women. Ultimately, the use of hermeneutic phenomenology enabled the research to contribute meaningful insights into the support systems and institutional interventions necessary to assist student-mothers in higher education settings.

3. Results and Discussions

The study involved ten (10) criminology student-mothers, each raising one child and not engaged in any form of employment. Their ages ranged from 20 to 25 years, with children aged between 11 months and 5 years. Participants were from various year levels: two were 1st-year students, two were 2nd-year, two were 3rd-year, and four were 4th-year students. From the transcribed interviews, six (6) major themes emerged, namely: Juggling the

Demands of Motherhood and Student Life, Shifting in Perspectives on Education and Motherhood, Struggles with Time and Energy Management, Pressures from Financial and Caregiving Responsibilities, Balancing Roles through Faith, Support, and Strategic Planning, and Redefining Success and Building Resilience.

3.1. Juggling the Demands of Motherhood and Student Life

Being both a student and a mother comes with an overwhelming set of responsibilities that are difficult to manage. The participants shared how balancing academic tasks with childcare duties often leads to exhaustion, emotional stress, and time constraints. This theme focuses on how these young mothers struggle to meet the demands of their dual roles, often sacrificing one for the other, yet remain committed to pushing forward for the sake of their children's futures. Participant 1 shared how her time is divided between being a student and caring for her child, especially when her child gets sick and needs immediate attention. Participant 3 expressed that it is difficult to manage her time, particularly when no one is available to look after her child during classes. She emphasized the emotional and physical exhaustion that comes with her responsibilities. Participant 7 described her struggle to focus on her academic tasks due to her child constantly wanting to be with her. She often must wait until her child sleeps before starting her schoolwork, leading to late nights and early mornings. These are their statements:

“Being a student and a mother at the same time is not easy because my time is divided. But I’m still thankful because my parents support me and my child, especially with financial needs. There are also times when I must sacrifice my studies, especially when my child needs immediate medication because it can’t be avoided when a child gets sick. It’s hard to explain the difficulty, but so far, I can manage.” (P1)

“For me, being a student and a mother is very hard because it’s difficult to manage my time, especially when no one is available to watch my child, and I have classes. The hardest part is when my child gets sick, and I don’t have enough money” (P3)

“But now, it’s different because my child always wants to be with me and it’s hard to focus on my tasks. So, I need to put my child to sleep first before I can do my work. That’s why there are times when I must stay up late and then have class early the next day. It’s really exhausting.” (P7)

In addition, Participant 2 highlighted the tiredness and stress from handling many responsibilities and sleepless nights, though she noted that strong support from her parents helps her cope. Participant 4 discussed moments of self-doubt and guilt when she must choose between her studies and her child’s needs, often feeling mentally and emotionally drained. These are their answers:

“There were days when I felt tired and stressed, trying to handle all my responsibilities. I had many sleepless nights and often felt worried. But the strong support from my parents has helped me a lot. They help take care of my baby so I can focus on my studies.” (P2)

“I often feel a mix of exhaustion, determination, and self-doubt. There are moments of guilt especially when I must choose between my studies and my child’s needs. I sometimes question if I’m doing enough or if I can manage this on my own.” (P4)

Moreover, Participant 10 also revealed the constant struggle she faces without a partner to support her. She juggles financial difficulties, childcare, and academics, sometimes skipping meals just to make ends meet. She also finds it difficult to concentrate at school due to worry for her child left at home. Participant 1 added that while her experience is challenging, it has helped her grow and become more mature. Finally, participants 4 and 3 reflected on how their perseverance and belief in their goals help them to keep going despite the obstacles they face. These are their answers:

“For me, being a student and a mother is very hard because it's difficult to manage my time, especially when no one is available to watch my child, and I have classes. The hardest part is when my child gets sick, and I don't have enough money.” (P3)

“Since I don't have a partner to support me with my studies and take care of my child, I find myself constantly struggling. There are times when I must ask my mom or sister for money just to buy medicine or pay for school fees. Even for something as simple as transportation fare, I sometimes must look for extra money by washing my sister's clothes to earn it. It's hard, but if I can attend school, I manage to push through, even if I must skip meals.” (P10)

“Sometimes I can't help but compare myself to full-time students because our situations are very different, and our experiences are not the same. This experience has made me stronger, changed my mindset, and helped me become more mature mentally.” (P1)

“Balancing both roles helped me value perseverance and strengthened my belief that learning and growth never stop, no matter the challenges.” (P4)

“I've learned that every struggle has meaning. As long as we stay determined and keep going, there's always a path toward success not just for ourselves, but also for our children.” (P3)

The participants' narratives vividly illustrate the complex and multifaceted challenges of balancing motherhood with academic life. Their stories reveal the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of managing dual responsibilities, while emphasizing the crucial role of perseverance, adaptive strategies, and robust support systems in navigating these difficulties. Despite the immense pressures they face, the participants consistently demonstrate remarkable resilience and an unwavering commitment both to securing a better future for their children and to achieving their own educational aspirations. The challenges encountered by student-mothers in balancing parenting and academic responsibilities align closely with recent scholarly research. Nguyen, Smith, and Johnson (2020) identified the significant role conflict experienced by student-mothers, noting the heightened stress and emotional exhaustion that arise from simultaneously fulfilling academic and parenting duties. Similarly, Patel, Garcia, and Lee (2021) emphasized the essential role of effective time management strategies in minimizing stress and enhancing academic performance, echoing the struggles participants shared in balancing childcare and school responsibilities. Furthermore, Thompson, Brown, and Evans (2022) highlighted the critical importance of strong support systems—including familial, peer, and institutional resources—in fostering resilience among student-mothers. The findings resonate with the principles of Role Strain Theory, which posits that internal tension

emerges when individuals attempt to meet conflicting demands across multiple roles. Student-mothers in this study experienced profound role strain as they navigated the overlapping, and often competing, expectations of academia and parenting. Their daily routines reflected an ongoing tug-of-war between academic deadlines and childcare obligations, resulting in emotional exhaustion, divided focus, and occasional feelings of inadequacy. However, beyond merely highlighting stress, the participants' narratives also illustrate how role strain prompted adaptive behaviors: the constant need to prioritize, adjust routines, seek support, and reframe success. This dynamic adaptation demonstrates that while role conflict generates considerable pressure, it can also foster growth, resilience, and strategic problem-solving among student-mothers. The study's findings emphasize the profound emotional and psychological impacts of managing dual roles, while also highlighting the ways in which student-mothers cultivate coping mechanisms and resilience in response to these pressures. Given these insights, it becomes clear that educational institutions must acknowledge and address the unique stressors faced by student-mothers. To mitigate the adverse effects of role strain, practical interventions such as flexible class scheduling, childcare support, counseling services, and academic accommodations should be implemented. Integrating these support measures, institutions can help reduce emotional exhaustion, lessen the burden of conflicting roles, and ultimately empower student-mothers to achieve success both academically and personally.

3.2. Shifting Perspectives on Education and Motherhood

The transition to motherhood has significantly reshaped how the participants view both education and parenting. What was once seen as a personal journey toward success is now understood as a responsibility that also influences their child's future. This theme captures the internal shift in how these young mothers perceive the value of education not only for themselves but as a crucial step toward building a better life for their children and how their understanding of motherhood has deepened through experience. Participant 1 reflected on how her perspective changed after becoming a mother, realizing the weight of responsibilities and sacrifices that come with the role. She emphasized that being a young mother is far more challenging than she initially thought, and it has made her see the greater importance of education in achieving her dreams. Participant 2 shared a similar transformation, stating that education, once viewed as self-centered progress, is now an investment in her child's future. She also acknowledged the difficulty of parenting and how it has become a central part of her life. These are their answers:

"My view on education has changed a lot since I became a mother. I now see how important education is in reaching my dreams. My view on being a mother also changed, because I now realize that being a young mother is not easy. You must make a lot of sacrifices. It's very different from when I wasn't a mother yet." (P1)

"I now realize that being a young mother is not easy. You must make a lot of sacrifices. It's very different from when I wasn't a mother yet." (P1)

"Being a student-mother has deeply changed the way I see education and parenting. Before, I saw education mainly as something for myself a way to improve my own life. Now, I see it as an important investment in my child's future. And I've also realized that being a parent is not an easy task." (P2)

Additionally, Participant 4 described how her experience as a student-mother has enriched her understanding of parenting and taught her the significance of resilience, time management, and being a good role model for her

child. Participant 3 echoed the same realization despite the hardship of juggling both roles, she discovered that her struggles have purpose and meaning. These reflections highlight a powerful growth in mindset, where education and motherhood are no longer separate paths, but deeply connected parts of their evolving identities. These are their answers:

“Education is not just for personal success but a way to build a better future for my child. It deepened my understanding of parenting by showing me the importance of resilience, time management, and setting a good example.” (P4)

“Being a student-mother has taught me that education is not just for personal success but a way to build a better future for my child. It deepened my understanding of parenting by showing me the importance of resilience, time management, and setting a good example.” (P4)

“Being a student-mother has deeply changed the way I see both education and parenting. Becoming a mother doesn’t mean I have to give up on my dreams of finishing school. Even though it’s challenging to balance both roles, I’ve learned that every struggle has meaning.” (P3)

The participants’ narratives collectively reveal a profound transformation in how they view their roles as both students and mothers. These young women now see education not just as a means of personal advancement, but as a foundation for their children’s future. Their journey into motherhood has opened their eyes to the realities of parenting, demanding sacrifice, strength, and maturity. Despite the challenges, they remain determined to continue their studies, driven by a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to their dual roles. The evolving perspectives on education and motherhood among student-mothers are echoed in numerous scholarly works. A study by Anderson, Brown, and Clark (2021) highlighted how motherhood often reshapes women's educational goals, emphasizing the role of education to secure a better future for their children. Additionally, research by Thompson, Green, and Lewis (2022) explored the dual identity of being both a student and a mother, noting that this experience enriches personal growth and resilience. Furthermore, the work of Harris, Miller, and Roberts (2023) examined the transformative effect of motherhood on women's priorities, finding that many women develop a stronger commitment to education as they recognize its importance for their children's success. This emphasizes how becoming a mother reshapes the way student-mothers perceive their educational pursuits. According to Role Strain Theory, the strain felt when fulfilling conflicting roles often leads to a reevaluation of priorities and goals. In this case, the experience of motherhood prompted student-mothers to shift their focus from individual academic achievement to a broader, future-oriented goal: providing better opportunities for their children. This shift indicates an adaptation process in which the strain of balancing dual roles not only creates stress but also redefines the meaning of success. The student-mothers began to view education not just as a personal milestone, but as an investment in their children's future well-being. As Role Strain Theory suggests, individuals experiencing role conflict often recalibrate their expectations, and in the context of student-mothers, this recalibration highlights the importance of integrating family and academic responsibilities into a unified sense of purpose. The findings reveal how becoming a mother shifted student-mothers' perspectives on education, emphasizing the role of education as not just a personal goal but as a means to create a better future for their children. This shift indicates that

motherhood profoundly influences how student-mothers prioritize their educational pursuits, often seeing their studies as part of a larger, more meaningful purpose. It highlights the transformative nature of education in the lives of student-mothers and how their experiences as parents reframe their views on personal achievement. This suggests that educational institutions should acknowledge the evolving motivations of student-mothers. By understanding how their perspectives on education are intertwined with their roles as mothers, schools can tailor support programs that emphasize the long-term benefits of education, not only for the students themselves but for their families. These programs should provide a sense of community, foster empowerment, and help student-mothers integrate their educational goals with their aspirations for their children's future.

3.3. Struggles with Time and Energy Management

This reflects the intense challenge student-mothers face in balancing academic and parenting responsibilities. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the constant need to manage both roles, which often results in exhaustion and neglect of personal well-being. The pressure to meet academic deadlines while caring for their child leaves little time for self-care, contributing to physical and emotional strain. Despite these challenges, student-mothers develop coping mechanisms, such as careful time management, to navigate their busy lives, emphasizing the need for flexibility and understanding from academic institutions.

Participant 1 shared how her daily routine is packed with chores such as washing clothes, cooking, caring for her baby, and studying all of which compete for her time. Participant 2 emphasized that there simply aren't enough hours in the day to balance school and childcare, making it hard to give proper attention to either. She also mentioned the lack of sleep and its impact on her ability to concentrate. Participant 4 echoed this struggle, pointing out the difficulty of limited time, ongoing tiredness, and the pressure of completing schoolwork while caring for her child. These are their answers:

"Sometimes I struggle to manage my time because I have a lot to do, like washing clothes, cooking, taking care of the baby, and studying." (P1)

"Balancing school and being a mother are challenging. One big problem is not having enough time there just aren't enough hours in the day to focus on both schoolwork and taking care of a child." (P2)

"Lack of sleep is also a constant issue, making it hard to concentrate and feel energized." (P2)

"Balancing school and being a mother are hard because of limited time, tiredness, and the constant challenge of trying to finish school tasks while also taking care of my child at the same time." (P4)

Additionally, Participant 5 also expressed that time management is her biggest challenge. Participant 6 said her time is entirely divided between academics and her child, leaving none for herself. Also, Participants 8 and 9 both described the mental and physical exhaustion that comes with trying to balance everything, with Participant 9 also noting how this lifestyle causes ongoing stress. These are their answers:

"The challenge I've experienced while balancing studies and motherhood is really about time." (P5)

"All my time is divided between studying and taking care of my child." (P6)

"I no longer have time for myself." (P6)

"Tiredness, both physically and mentally." (P8)

"I must divide my time between assignments, exams, and other academic duties while also taking care of my child." (P9)

"Stress and exhaustion are the result of trying to balance both." (P9)

These stories reflect the common hardship student-mothers endure in trying to fulfill their dual roles. The constant demand on their time and energy affects not only their academic performance but also their well-being. The struggles of student-mothers in managing time and energy are well-documented in academic literature, underscoring the significant burden they experience. Studies have consistently highlighted that the dual responsibility of motherhood and academics leads to physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, resulting in poor concentration, stress, and a lack of personal time. Research by Harris, Thompson, and Miller (2020) examined the time-management strategies of student-mothers and found that many face difficulties in allocating time for both academic tasks and family responsibilities. Their study revealed that the lack of adequate time to complete academic work and care for their children often leads to heightened stress and burnout. Similarly, Johnson, Lee, and Brown (2019) explored the time constraints faced by student-mothers and found that the constant need to divide attention between school, childcare, and housework reduces their ability to engage in self-care, contributing to fatigue and sleep deprivation. The lack of sleep and constant exhaustion negatively impacts both academic performance and overall well-being. Moreover, Smith, Jackson, and Harris (2021) highlighted that student-mothers often experience "role conflict" due to competing demands, with time management becoming a significant barrier to academic success. Their research emphasized how managing multiple roles being a student, a mother, and sometimes a worker leads to chronic fatigue, difficulty focusing on studies, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment. This role conflict is compounded by societal expectations of perfect performance in both academic and maternal roles. The challenges faced by student-mothers in managing time and energy can be understood through Role Strain Theory and Resilience Theory. Role Strain Theory highlights the stress that arises when student-mothers balance academic and parenting roles. This conflict between demands often leads to strain, as they struggle to meet expectations in both areas. According to Goode (1960), role strain can be alleviated by adjusting expectations and prioritizing tasks, which can be supported by educational institutions through flexible schedules or hybrid learning formats. On the other hand, Resilience Theory emphasizes how student-mothers develop resilience to overcome these challenges. As defined by Werner (1982), resilience enables them to adapt and persist despite adversity. Student-mothers who face time and energy management struggles often draw strength from their coping strategies and support systems. Educational institutions that foster resilience by offering support services, like counseling and flexible course options, can help student-mothers build the necessary skills to thrive academically while managing their parenting duties. The findings underscore the significant challenge student-mothers face in managing both academic responsibilities and the demands of motherhood. The competing time constraints and limited energy resources lead to heightened stress and fatigue. These struggles reveal how critical effective time and energy management are for student-mothers in maintaining a balance between their dual

roles. It highlights the need for external support systems to alleviate the pressure of balancing education and parenting. This suggest that educational institutions might consider offering flexible course schedules, such as evening, online, or hybrid classes, to accommodate the unique needs of student-mothers. By providing these options, schools can ease the burden on student-mothers, allowing them to better manage their time and energy between academic and caregiving responsibilities. This flexibility can lead to reduced stress and a more supportive academic environment, ultimately improving the academic success and well-being of student-mothers.

3.4. Pressures from Financial and Caregiving Responsibilities

This theme captures the everyday pressures that young student-mothers face due to financial strain and caregiving demands. Balancing the role of a student while also ensuring the well-being of a child poses a significant challenge, particularly when financial resources are limited. These young mothers must constantly prioritize between academic responsibilities and the needs of their children, often at the expense of their own health and comfort. Several participants shared their difficulties in managing financial burdens while attending school and taking care of their children. Participant 1 noted the challenge of handling expenses, especially for her child's basic needs, pointing out that the limited financial resources created constant stress and forced her to make difficult choices between academic materials and essential childcare items. Participant 3 expressed that providing for both academic requirements and childcare essentials has become one of the most difficult aspects of her life, explaining how the pressure of securing enough funds to meet both educational and familial needs compounded her daily stress. These financial strains highlight a critical aspect of the student-mother experience, revealing the often-overlooked challenge of balancing financial responsibilities while trying to pursue academic success. These are their answers:

"It's also hard financially because there are many expenses, especially with my child's needs." (P1)

"Sometimes, my child even has an emergency, and it affects my studies." (P1)

"One of the hardest parts is the financial side because I have needs for school and for my child." (P3)

"As a mother and a student, one of the hardest parts is the financial side because I have needs for school and for my child, and it's hard for me to provide for both. That's why I can really say that being a student-mother is very hard, but I keep going for the future." (P3)

Additionally, Participant 10 shared the emotional and physical toll of skipping meals to prioritize her child's and school's needs. She also explained how caregiving affects her studies, particularly during emergencies or when no one is available to look after her child. Participant 7 described how illness either her own or her child's can disrupt her academic obligations, making it hard to focus or attend school. These testimonies reveal how limited financial capacity, and the absence of consistent caregiving support intensify the struggle of student-mothers, forcing them to make difficult choices on a daily basis. These are their answers:

"The financial problems are something I face every day." (P10)

"Sometimes, I experience skipping meals to save for my child's needs or my schoolwork. This experience has shown me that being a student is not just about emotional sacrifices but also physical and financial ones." (P10)

“The financial problems are something I face every day. Another issue is who will take care of my child when my father is also working. Every Monday morning, I need to feed my child before I take them to school. Because of this, instead of joining the inspection every Monday, I choose to focus on my responsibility as a mother. I don’t want to leave my child without food or in a messy situation.” (P10)

“When my child gets sick and I also have school requirements, or when I get sick myself, it becomes very difficult.” (P7)

“One issue is who will take care of my child when my father is also working.” (P10)

“I don’t want to leave my child without food or in a messy situation.” (P10)

The pressures described by the participants are reflected in academic literature. According to Lopez, Sanders, and Brooks (2020), student-mothers frequently face financial insecurity and lack sufficient support systems, leading to increased dropout risks. Likewise, Miller, Gomez, and Price (2021) found that financial hardship is a major source of academic disruption for student-parents, especially when they lack reliable childcare. In another study, Torres, Hampton, and Lee (2022) highlighted how caregiving demands, combined with economic stress, significantly impact the academic performance and emotional well-being of student-mothers. These studies align with the lived experiences of the participants, underscoring the need for institutional attention to the dual burdens these women carry. The pressures from financial and caregiving responsibilities faced by student-mothers can be understood through Role Strain Theory and Social Support Theory. Role Strain Theory suggests that the conflicting demands of academics and caregiving create stress and role conflict, leading to strain. In this context, providing financial assistance and caregiving support can alleviate these burdens, enabling student-mothers to better balance their responsibilities. Social Support Theory, on the other hand, highlights the importance of external support systems, such as financial aid and childcare services, in reducing stress and helping student-mothers manage their multiple roles. Access to these resources can help mitigate the strain caused by competing responsibilities and improve their ability to succeed academically. The findings highlight that financial and caregiving pressures create a compounded challenge for student-mothers, often exacerbating the stress they experience in balancing education and parenting. These challenges demonstrate how the lack of sufficient financial resources and caregiving support directly impacts student-mothers’ ability to focus on their studies and maintain a healthy family life. The interconnectedness of these pressures further emphasizes the need for systemic changes in the educational environment to address these unique needs. This underscores the need for educational institutions to provide more accessible financial assistance and caregiving support tailored specifically for student-mothers. Addressing these challenges, institutions can reduce role strain and enhance student-mothers' academic success, enabling them to balance both their educational and caregiving responsibilities.

3.5. Balancing Roles through Faith, Support, and Strategic Planning

This theme highlights how student-mothers utilize a combination of emotional, spiritual, and practical strategies to manage their dual roles. Participants emphasized that faith provided them with emotional strength and resilience, while family support, particularly in childcare, allowed them to focus on their studies. Strategic planning, such as

time management and prioritization, was essential in helping them juggle academic tasks and caregiving responsibilities. These strategies highlight the critical importance of a supportive network and structured approach in enabling student-mothers to persevere through their demanding responsibilities. Participant 1 emphasized how making time for herself helped reduce stress and improved her ability to manage both motherhood and academics. Participant 3 and Participant 10 shared that prayer and trust in God helped them stay emotionally grounded, especially during challenging moments. The power of faith served not only as a coping mechanism but also as a source of strength and motivation. In addition, emotional and practical support from family members emerged as a recurring theme.

These are their answers:

“But even though I’m busy, I always make sure to take time for myself to reduce stress. Because of this, I’m able to manage my roles as a mother and a student better.” (P1)

“I use my free time for school projects and other tasks.” (P1)

“I talk to God through prayers to help relieve my stress and problems.” (P3)

These challenges have taught me to trust in myself and in the path that God has set for me, knowing that He has a better plan for my future” (P10)

Additionally, Participant 8 pointed out that patience was a crucial emotional strategy to stay productive and mentally balanced. The individual expressed that without patience, the overwhelming nature of balancing both academic and parental responsibilities would hinder effectiveness. Patience served as an anchor, allowing the participant to stay calm and focused despite the pressures of daily life. Participant 10 concluded that despite the hardships, perseverance allowed her to keep moving forward. Despite their exhaustion and challenges, their faith, family support, and effective planning have provided them with the strength to persevere and achieve their goals. These are their statements:

“Patience has been a key strategy for me. Without it, my mind would be overwhelmed, and nothing would get done effectively.” (P8)

“Despite the difficulties, I keep striving and never gave up.” (P10)

Furthermore, Participant 3 and Participant 5 mentioned that their families' encouragement and help with childcare made it easier for them to focus on their schoolwork. They emphasized how the emotional and logistical support from their families allowed them to manage their time more effectively, reducing the stress of balancing academic demands with childcare duties. Participant 4 shared how creating a structured schedule, prioritizing tasks, and practicing self-care helped her balance her roles. She noted that having a clear plan allowed her to stay organized and avoid feeling overwhelmed by her responsibilities. Similarly, Participant 2 also relied on daily task planning and using her free time effectively to stay on top of her responsibilities. She highlighted that this strategy enabled her to stay focused on her academic tasks while still attending to her child's needs. These are their answers:

“I rely on the emotional support of my family, which encourages me to keep going and strive harder in both my role as a mother and a student.” (P3)

“My family is there to help me especially in taking care of my child so I can finish my schoolwork.” “By managing my time well, I’ve been able to handle both roles as a student and a mother. Also, seeking emotional support has helped me cope better with the challenges I face every day.” (P5)

“Creating a structured schedule, prioritizing tasks seeking support from family, and practicing self-care have been essential strategies that helped me balance my responsibilities as both a mother and a student.” (P4)

“I try to focus on what really needs to be done each day and make a simple schedule to guide me. I also use any free time I must work on school tasks. Another coping strategy that really helps me is asking for support from my family their support keeps me going, especially during stressful times.” “Asking for support from my family their support keeps me going, especially during stressful times.” (P2)

These lived experiences are supported by several studies. Brown, Morris, and Sheffield (2020) found that student-mothers often turn to emotional and spiritual resilience, including prayer and faith, to manage the stress of their dual roles. Santiago, Alvarez, and Cruz (2019) also highlighted the role of spiritual coping, stating that religious practices help student-mothers deal with academic and personal pressures. Meanwhile, Martinez, Gutierrez, and Herrera (2021) emphasized that effective time management positively affects academic outcomes for student-mothers. Their research revealed that task prioritization and proper scheduling were key to success. Tan, Castillo, and Morales (2020) focused on the importance of family support, showing that student-mothers who receive emotional and caregiving assistance from family are more likely to persist in their education. Similarly, Delos Reyes, Santiago, and Lim (2018) concluded that those who plan strategically and lean on strong support systems are better able to cope with the challenges of being both a parent and a student. Balancing roles through faith, support, and strategic planning can be framed through Resilience Theory and Social Support Theory. Resilience Theory emphasizes how student-mothers draw strength from various sources, such as faith, family support, and effective planning, to overcome adversity and persist in their educational journey. This process of adaptation is vital for student-mothers in managing both academic and caregiving responsibilities. Social Support Theory also highlights how support systems, whether from family, peers, or institutions, serve as buffers to stress, facilitating resilience and helping them navigate the complexities of their roles. Faith and strategic planning are key coping mechanisms that allow them to succeed despite the challenges they face. The findings emphasize that student-mothers rely heavily on faith, social support networks, and strategic planning to navigate the challenges of balancing academic responsibilities with parenting duties. Faith and family support emerged as central to their resilience, providing emotional strength and motivation to persevere. The use of strategic planning, such as time management, also played a crucial role in maintaining balance. This underscores the importance of internal and external resources in sustaining student-mothers' academic journeys, highlighting that emotional, social, and practical tools are vital in mitigating the pressures they face. Institutions might therefore promote wellness programs, peer support groups, and practical workshops that address both the emotional and academic needs of student-mothers. By fostering a supportive environment that acknowledges both their academic and caregiving roles, institutions can enhance student-mothers' ability to thrive in their dual responsibilities, ensuring that they have the resources needed to succeed.

3.6. Redefining Success and Building Resilience

This theme reflects the remarkable resilience and perseverance demonstrated by student-mothers who redefine success amidst the challenges they face balancing academic responsibilities and caregiving. Despite the demands of motherhood and schoolwork, many participants reported that these hardships strengthened their resolve and helped them grow, both as individuals and as parents. Their stories emphasize how they have reshaped their understanding of success, moving beyond traditional academic milestones to include personal growth, perseverance, and the well-being of their children. For instance, Participant 1 shared how overcoming the challenge of managing both roles without failing any subjects became a significant achievement. Similarly, Participant 4 and Participant 6 recounted moments of completion, such as finishing major assignments and passing exams while simultaneously fulfilling maternal duties, which led them to feel immense pride in their dual accomplishments. This sentiment aligns with the notion of “success” evolving beyond academic recognition. These are their answers:

“I have successfully passed several semesters without failing any subjects. That is the achievement I can be proud of so far, considering the challenges of handling both roles, but I was still able to manage.” “Through this experience, I realized I can do much more than I imagined”. “I’ve become stronger and have learned how to manage my time and, most importantly, my money. And that I gained the strength to keep working hard because I know that what I’m doing this for both me and my child.” (P1)

“Finished a major assignment while also taking care of my child during a particularly exhausting day, I felt a deep sense of achievement, knowing I could balance both my academic and maternal responsibilities despite the challenges.” (P4)

“Often feel tired and stressed, especially when managing both roles as a student and a mother. But despite these emotions, I keep going because I know I’m doing this for my child.” “I was able to complete all my projects, assignments, quizzes, and exams that semester, while also balancing my responsibilities as a mother. It was a fulfilling moment, proving that I could manage both roles despite the challenges.” (P6)

Additionally, Participant 2 and Participant 5 discussed how time and money management were significant factors in their growth. In line with these experiences, Participant 7 and Participant 10 acknowledged how their persistence and resilience helped them overcome setbacks, ultimately shaping them into stronger individuals. The concept of success in this context is not only defined by academic performance but by the growth of resilience, adaptability, and the ability to persevere despite challenges. As Participant 10 highlighted, these challenges, though difficult, served as lessons that helped them build a better future for their children and themselves. These are their answers:

“I finished a major assignment and passed an exam, all while taking care of my young child. As we all know, doing schoolwork and studying while also watching over a baby is not easy.” (P2)

“Even with all the struggles, every small or big success makes me proud. (P4)

The challenges taught me how to be strong and adjust to difficult situations. I learned how to manage my time better, focus on what's most important." (P2)

"These challenges helped shape me into a 'super mom' no matter how difficult or tiring things get, I push through everything for my child. It changed the way I see life, making me more determined and focused on my goals." (P7)

"I became more aware of the reality that I need to work hard. I learned to be responsible, especially because I have a child to take care of." (P5)

"These challenges changed the way I see life, making me more determined and focused on my goals." (P7)

"Now that I'm a mother, I have accepted the reality that I need to work hard, not just for myself, but also for my child. Despite the challenges, I've also learned not to give up. Instead, I have become more resilient and persevered in continuing to move forward." (P10)

"As a student mother, through the hardships and difficulties I've experienced, I realized that over time I became more resilient. The challenges I faced in balancing both roles have taught me how to handle setbacks and adapt to changing situations." (P2)

"It made me realize that studying is not just for myself, but also for the future of my child. Being a mother inspires me to work harder in school, because I want to give my child a better life." (P5)

Furthermore, Participant 8 expressed a deep sense of purpose and personal growth that came from balancing their academic journey with the responsibilities of motherhood. Participant 3 underscored the value of pursuing one's dreams, stating that every sacrifice, no matter how small or great, brings her closer to success. Her perspective reinforces the idea that the hardships faced by student-mothers are not setbacks but steppingstones toward a meaningful goal. These are their answers:

"The challenges have made me stronger and more resilient. I now realize that perseverance is key to overcoming these obstacles and achieving a brighter future for both my child and me." (P8)

"Despite the challenges, I saw that I was doing well in my studies and, at the same time, ensuring that my child was healthy and happy. That balance gave me a deep sense of fulfillment." (P8)

"Pursuing our dreams is important because, in the end, every sacrifice leads to success." (P3)

Recent studies emphasize the role of resilience in enabling student-parents to balance academic and family responsibilities effectively. According to a study by Parrott et al. (2021), resilience is a critical factor that allows student-parents to thrive despite facing significant stressors. Their research highlighted that student-parents often redefine success, prioritizing personal growth and stability for their families, in addition to academic achievements. This mirrors the experiences shared by participants in this study, where success is seen not just as academic success but as an achievement in personal development and the well-being of their children. In a similar vein, a study by Sandoval et al. (2020) explored how student-parents with strong emotional support networks and effective coping strategies, such as time management and emotional regulation, were more likely to persist and

succeed in both academic and parental roles. These findings align with the coping mechanisms highlighted by the participants, including relying on family support and creating structured schedules to manage their dual responsibilities. Furthermore, research by Williams and Johnson (2019) found that student-parents develop a greater sense of self-efficacy as they navigate the complexities of academia and parenthood. Their study emphasized that these students often experience personal growth as they learn to adapt and overcome challenges, which directly reflects the sentiments of the participants in this study, who noted their increased resilience and stronger sense of self-worth despite facing adversity. This aligns with Resilience Theory, which underscores the importance of personal strength and adaptability in overcoming challenges. For student-mothers, resilience is not just about managing academic responsibilities but also about reshaping their sense of success to include both their educational and parenting roles. This redefined success often involves setting personal goals that reflect both their ambitions as students and their responsibilities as mothers. By adapting to their circumstances, student-mothers can cultivate resilience that enables them to persist despite obstacles. The findings highlight how student-mothers redefine success by shifting their perspectives on what it means to thrive academically while balancing the demands of motherhood. This redefinition emphasizes resilience, with student-mothers drawing strength from their ability to overcome adversity and adapt to challenges. Building resilience, they can persist despite the competing demands of education and parenting, seeing their academic success as intertwined with their role as mothers.

This emphasizes that student-mothers' sense of accomplishment is not solely measured by traditional academic milestones but by their ability to overcome obstacles and maintain a balance between their dual roles. Institutions can support this process by offering mentorship programs, time management resources, and stress-relief initiatives that empower student-mothers to navigate the dual demands of academia and motherhood. Such targeted support helps student-mothers build the resilience necessary for balancing their roles, fostering greater academic success and personal fulfillment.

This poem captures the lived experiences of student-mothers as they navigate the demanding balance between academic responsibilities and motherhood. It reflects their daily struggles, sacrifices, and resilience, showing how despite exhaustion, financial hardships, and emotional challenges, they remain strong and determined. The poem highlights that while they are often tired, they remain unbroken, fueled by their dreams, their children, and their faith.

Tired but Unbroken

Poem by: Queeny Rose C. Baluyos

They wake up early every day,

With books to read and work to play.

They carry dreams and carry a child,

Trying to smile, though life gets wild.

*In school they learn, at home they care,
Some days it feels too much to bear.
But deep inside, they know it's right,
To keep on going, to win the fight.*

*They used to think that school was hard,
But motherhood has changed their heart.
They study now not just for pride,
But for their child right but their side.*

*Sleep is scarce, stress is real,
But they carry on and never kneel.
They find support, they have some hope,
They keep on climbing, learning to cope.*

*Money is tight, the work is tough,
But faith and love are just enough.
Family helps, and friends are near,
Their hands and words bring strength and cheer.*

*They may be drained, but never weak,
They rise again; they find what they seek.
Though the journey is far from done,
They walk it bravely, one by one.*

*They are a student and a mother too,
With countless task and much to do.
They face the storm and never hide
Tired but unbroken – with strength as their guide.*

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, student-mothers face significant challenges in balancing their academic and parenting roles, as the competing demands of school and home often overwhelm their time and attention. These difficulties, however,

serve as catalysts for building resilience and strengthening their determination to succeed academically. The major obstacles they encounter, including limited time, physical exhaustion, and the pressures of financial and caregiving responsibilities, profoundly impact their ability to manage both spheres. Despite these hardships, student-mothers demonstrate remarkable perseverance by developing effective coping strategies, which enable them to stay motivated and focused on their goals. Their drive is fueled by a deep sense of purpose, as they strive to succeed not only for their own personal fulfillment but also to secure a better future for their children.

4.1. Future Suggestions

1. Future research should explore how academic institutions can design and implement comprehensive support systems specifically tailored to student-mothers. These may include on-campus childcare facilities, flexible class schedules, academic advising geared toward parenting students, and mental health counseling. Studies could evaluate the effectiveness of such programs in enhancing the academic performance, well-being, and retention rates of student-mothers.

2. To gain a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of student-mothers, future studies should compare challenges and coping strategies across different educational levels (e.g., undergraduate, graduate, vocational) and demographic groups (e.g., age, socio-economic status, single vs. partnered mothers). This would help identify specific needs and develop targeted interventions for subgroups that may be more vulnerable or underserved.

3. Conducting long-term studies following student-mothers from enrollment through graduation and into their professional lives would provide valuable insights into the lasting impact of balancing motherhood and studies. Such research could examine how these experiences influence their career trajectories, financial independence, family dynamics, and personal development over time.

4. Future research should delve into the role of social support networks—such as partners, extended family, friends, and community organizations—in helping student-mothers navigate their dual responsibilities. Understanding the types and sources of support that are most beneficial can inform programs aimed at strengthening these networks.

5. Further studies could focus on identifying and assessing the most effective coping strategies used by student-mothers to manage stress, maintain motivation, and stay academically engaged. These findings could be used to develop resilience-building workshops or peer support groups that empower student-mothers with practical tools and emotional support to thrive in both their educational and parenting roles.

5. Recommendations

In light of the findings, several recommendations can enhance the experiences of student-mothers. Educational institutions should consider offering more flexible academic schedules, such as online learning options, evening classes, or part-time programs, to better accommodate the unique needs of student-mothers. Additionally, schools could benefit from providing support services like counseling, academic tutoring, and childcare options, which would help student-mothers effectively balance their educational and parental responsibilities. For government agencies, it is crucial to explore targeted financial assistance programs designed specifically for student-mothers.

These could include subsidies for childcare, transportation, and study materials, thus alleviating the financial strain of managing both education and motherhood. Scholarships or grants tailored to this group would further ensure that student-mothers have access to the opportunities they deserve. For the student-mothers they, seeking and utilizing available support systems—such as family, friends, and peer mentorship—can be invaluable. Through building a strong network of emotional and practical support, they can more easily navigate the demands of both their academic and parental roles. Furthermore, student-mothers can benefit from honing time management skills, utilizing planners or digital tools, and setting realistic priorities to achieve a healthy balance between their academic commitments and personal life. Lastly, future researchers could investigate how financial aid and flexible schedules in educational institutions impact the ability of student-mothers to balance their academic and caregiving duties, shedding light on the continued challenges and necessary improvements in support systems.

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Consent for publication

The authors declare that they consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

Both the authors took part in literature review, analysis, and manuscript writing equally.

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