

Academic life and struggles of student mothers

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ABSTRACT

Student mothers in higher education manage academic obligations alongside childcare, household work, and financial pressures. Despite growing interest in student-parent experiences, evidence from the Philippines, particularly from the Caraga Region where early childbearing remains a continuing concern, is still limited. This convergent mixed-methods study examined the academic conditions and adaptive responses of 22 student mothers enrolled in a state university in Caraga. Survey responses were summarized through descriptive statistics, while interview narratives were analyzed thematically. The findings show that the most persistent pressures involve academic workload, childcare constraints, and limited income. To remain enrolled, participants relied mainly on careful scheduling, support from family members, peer assistance, and deliberate budgeting. Even with these adaptive practices, the respondents described limited institutional support, particularly in relation to flexible academic arrangements, affordable childcare options, and focused financial assistance. The study highlights the need for Philippine state universities to adopt more responsive measures that can improve the retention, well-being, and academic progress of student mothers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Student mothers constitute a significant yet insufficiently examined population in higher education. Their schooling unfolds alongside caregiving, domestic work, and financial survival, conditions that become more demanding in settings such as Caraga, Philippines, where early childbearing remains a continuing social issue [1]–[3]. Although women now have broader access to tertiary education, the everyday experience of earning a degree while caring for children is still not widely documented [4]. The strain becomes greater when universities are structured primarily for traditional students and offer few accommodations for parenting demands [5], [6].

Education remains a major route to social mobility and human development [7]. In the Philippines, the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 emphasizes broadening educational participation as part of national capacity building [8]. Although scholarship on educational equity has expanded, limited work has focused specifically on student mothers in the Philippines, particularly in the Caraga Region. Prior studies point to persistent problems such as time scarcity, role overload, financial insecurity, guilt, and isolation [9], [10]. They further show that limited institutional assistance can heighten the risk of academic disruption and social marginalization [11], [12]. When these conditions remain unaddressed, student mothers may find degree completion more difficult, thereby reproducing gendered forms of disadvantage and poverty. Much of the available literature treats student parents as a broad category and gives less attention to the regional,

cultural, and institutional conditions shaping student mothers in Caraga. There is also value in combining statistical patterns with personal narratives to produce a fuller account of their experiences.

This study draws on role strain theory, which explains how tension develops when one person must meet competing role expectations, such as those associated with being both a student and a mother [13]. The framework helps interpret recurring issues in this study, including fatigue, scheduling conflict, and competing priorities. Ecological systems theory is also useful because it highlights how family relationships, community realities, and university policies interact with personal constraints such as limited time and scarce resources [14]. Together, these perspectives show that the academic outcomes of student mothers depend not only on individual effort but also on the support systems around them.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the academic experiences, major challenges, and coping practices of student mothers in the Caraga Region, Philippines. Its contribution lies in foregrounding a setting where early childbearing is a significant social concern and where institutional responses remain limited. Through this focus, the study aims to generate practical insights that may guide university-level reforms intended to improve persistence, participation, and well-being among student mothers. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: i) what are the specific academic challenges faced by student mothers in the Caraga region, Philippines? ii) how do financial constraints and childcare responsibilities affect their academic performance? iii) what coping strategies do student mothers employ to balance their educational, caregiving, and financial responsibilities? and iv) what institutional support systems are necessary to help student mothers succeed in higher education?

Compared with prior studies, this paper brings together regional vulnerability, limited institutional support, and the agency of student mothers in one analytical frame. It highlights how student mothers in Caraga negotiate academic demands and caregiving work within conditions marked by early motherhood, economic constraint, and insufficient institutional assistance.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine the academic experiences, challenges, and adaptive practices of student mothers in Caraga. As explained in Creswell [15], mixed-methods inquiry integrates quantitative and qualitative evidence within a single study to develop a more complete understanding of a phenomenon. In this investigation, the quantitative strand used a structured survey and descriptive procedures to identify recurrent patterns and tendencies in the participants' responses. The qualitative strand relied on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore the depth, meaning, and complexity of their lived situations.

2.2. Participants and selection criteria

The participants were 22 student mothers enrolled in a state university in Caraga. They were selected purposively based on two requirements: they had to be officially enrolled during academic year 2024-2025 and they had to have dependent children. This sampling strategy ensured that the respondents could speak directly to the phenomenon under study. Because the sample was small, the findings are best read as context-specific and descriptive rather than broadly generalizable. Studies involving larger and more varied groups are needed to test the wider applicability of these results.

2.3. Data collection procedures

Quantitative information was gathered through a structured survey composed of demographic items and Likert-scale statements on challenges and coping practices. Prior to full administration, the instrument was pilot-tested and reviewed by experts in education and psychology. The reliability of the scale for challenges and coping strategies yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews intended to draw out participants' lived experiences. Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes and covered 10 open-ended questions on academic difficulties, childcare concerns, and coping responses. With consent from the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis.

2.4. Data analysis

For the quantitative strand, frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were computed to describe the participants' demographic characteristics as well as the challenges and coping strategies they reported. For the qualitative strand, the interview transcripts were examined through the six-phase thematic analysis process described in Braun and Clarke [16], including familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, and report writing. To strengthen analytic trustworthiness, a second researcher reviewed the coding decisions and emerging themes independently.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Demographic profile

The demographic data show a clear profile of the respondents. Most were 20-23 years old, single, and living under constrained economic conditions, with the majority reporting monthly household income below Philippine Peso or PHP 5,000. Most also had one to three children, indicating that their academic work was carried out alongside substantial caregiving demands. This profile points to the overlap between early motherhood and socioeconomic vulnerability. Younger student mothers may face added difficulty because they often have fewer financial resources, less experience in balancing multiple roles, and narrower support networks. These patterns are consistent with earlier studies linking younger age, limited support, and economic hardship to a greater risk of educational disruption among student mothers [17]–[19]. The findings therefore suggest the need for targeted academic, social, and community-based support for young mothers who remain in school despite limited resources.

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the student mothers in terms of age, civil status, household income, ethnicity, number of children, and household size. The findings suggest that the student mothers were predominantly young, single, and from low-income households, highlighting the need for academic, financial, and social support mechanisms to assist them in balancing motherhood and university education.

Table 1. The demographic profile of the student mothers in the university

Age	F	Civil status	F	Household income	F	Ethnicity	F	No. of children	F	No. of household members	F
20-23	15	Single	15	Below 5000	19	Manobo	3	1-3	19	1-3	13
24-27	5	Lived-in	5	5000-15,000	2	None	19	4-6	6	4-6	6
28-31	2	Married	2	Above 15,000	1			7-9	1	7-9	0
										10-12	3

Note: F is frequency.

3.2. Challenges experienced by student mothers

The responses indicate that the major pressures experienced by student mothers cluster around academic demands, financial insecurity, and childcare responsibilities. Across the data, participants repeatedly described difficulty allocating time, sustaining household expenses, and finding dependable care for their children.

3.2.1. Academic challenges

Managing coursework while fulfilling parenting duties remained one of the strongest concerns raised by participants. They reported missed deadlines, difficulty attending classes, and reduced participation in collaborative academic tasks. These findings are consistent with prior work showing that student mothers often experience an “academic squeeze” and elevated stress because multiple responsibilities compete for the same time and energy [20]–[23].

P6: “Every minute counts. I plan study sessions around my childcare responsibilities.”

P3: “There are nights when I barely get any sleep.”

These accounts reinforce evidence that student parents commonly deal with fatigue, emotional strain, and anxiety, all of which can interfere with academic performance [21], [24], [25].

3.2.2. Childcare difficulties

Limited access to affordable and dependable childcare further intensified the participants’ stress. Respondents described how the lack of trustworthy care arrangements became especially difficult during examinations and other academically demanding periods. This concern is consistent with studies emphasizing the strong connection between childcare access and mothers’ educational continuity [20], [26].

P7: “Finding good childcare is difficult, particularly at exam times.”

3.2.3. Financial struggles

Restricted income deepened the burden experienced by many of the participants. Several described the need to work part-time, stretch limited resources, and make difficult spending decisions, all of which affected their studies.

P11: *“Paying for childcare, education costs, and living expenses on a tight income is an ongoing struggle.”*

The financial strain reported by the participants is consistent with earlier studies documenting the economic vulnerability of student mothers [27]–[29].

The highest-rated challenges were academic workload (M=4.36), financial struggles (M=4.33), and childcare difficulties (M=4.23). Taken together, these results show that student mothers routinely contend with time pressure, exhaustion, and restricted access to both academic and childcare resources. From the standpoint of role strain theory [13], these findings reflect persistent conflict between the expectations attached to motherhood and those attached to student life. When both sets of responsibilities demand the same time, attention, and money, the result is cumulative stress that may weaken academic performance and emotional well-being. The pattern also supports earlier studies showing that parenting demands, coursework, and financial instability create serious barriers to student mothers’ persistence in higher education [10]; [21]; [24]. These findings point to the need for universities to build more responsive forms of support, including flexible learning arrangements, affordable childcare options, and targeted financial assistance.

Table 2 presents the challenges encountered by student mothers in the university. The findings reveal that all identified areas were rated as strongly agree, indicating that these challenges were highly experienced by the respondents. It highlights the importance of institutional support programs, such as flexible learning arrangements, financial assistance, and childcare support, to help student mothers successfully manage their academic journey.

Table 2. Challenges encountered by the student mothers in the university

Specific area	Mean	Description
Academic workload	4.36	Strongly agree
Childcare difficulties	4.23	Strongly agree
Financial struggles	4.33	Strongly agree

3.3. Coping strategies employed

Despite these pressures, the participants described several ways of coping with their overlapping responsibilities. The most frequently mentioned approaches involved time management, family-based childcare support, and practical financial planning.

3.3.1. Academic strategies (time management)

To remain academically engaged, student mothers emphasized scheduling, prioritizing tasks, seeking academic help when needed, and using technology to stay organized. These practices resemble strategies identified in earlier work on student parents, particularly the value of time management and academic scaffolding [21]. At the same time, [29] noted that when domestic responsibilities become too heavy, coping strategies may be less effective and academic as well as family life may suffer.

P3: *“Having a realistic schedule with buffer time was important.”*

3.3.2. Childcare solutions (family support)

Family members, relatives, and informal support networks played a major role in childcare. Participants frequently relied on shared caregiving and trusted social connections to make school attendance and study time possible. Prior studies likewise describe these support systems as central to the success of student mothers [30], [31].

P7: *“Having a close group of friends in the program who are also student mothers has been a lifesaver.”*

3.3.3. Financial planning

Participants also described budgeting carefully, applying for scholarships, and seeking available grants or assistance. In the literature, similar forms of expense management and resource seeking have been identified as practical survival strategies for student mothers facing economic strain [32].

P8: *“I pursued all forms of financial aid available to student mothers.”*

The coping strategies rated most strongly were childcare solutions through family support ($M=4.44$), financial planning ($M=4.43$), and academic strategies such as time management ($M=4.34$). These findings suggest that student mothers actively draw on both personal discipline and social resources in order to sustain their studies. Their dependence on family networks, careful budgeting, and organized study routines is consistent with prior studies showing that student mothers frequently survive academic life through a combination of time management, peer or family support, and financial problem-solving [9], [29], [31], [33]. At the same time, the strength of these informal coping practices also signals the limited reach of institutional support [32]. Universities can respond more effectively by supplementing personal and family efforts with formal services such as parent-sensitive financial aid, flexible learning policies, and accessible childcare support. Table 3 presents the coping strategies employed by student mothers in managing their academic and personal responsibilities. All indicators were rated as Strongly Agree, showing that respondents actively utilized various strategies to address their challenges.

Table 3. Coping strategies employed by the student mothers

Specific area	Mean	Description
Academic strategies	4.34	Strongly agree
Childcare solutions	4.44	Strongly agree
Financial planning	4.43	Strongly agree

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the academic lives of student mothers in higher education within the Caraga Region, Philippines. The findings show that their educational experiences are shaped by the combined pressures of coursework, childcare, and financial limitation, as well as by the broader systems that either support or constrain them. Viewed through Role Strain Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, the results underscore that academic persistence among student mothers is influenced by both competing personal roles and the institutional environment in which those roles are managed. The study therefore highlights the importance of university reforms that are more responsive to student mothers' realities. Because the inquiry was based on a small and region-specific sample, the results should be interpreted cautiously. Future studies may build on these findings by involving larger and more diverse groups and by examining the long-term effects of institutional support and mental health conditions on student mothers' academic persistence.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes or interpretations presented in this study. All sources of funding, if any, have been duly acknowledged.

INFORMED CONSENT

The researchers have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study was conducted with careful attention to ethical principles throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a clear explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their expected participation. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they had the freedom to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time without experiencing any negative consequences. The researchers also ensured that all information gathered from the participants was treated with confidentiality and used strictly for research purposes. To further protect their privacy, individual responses were kept anonymous and were presented only in a manner that prevented the identification of specific participants.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [NMMA], upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and privacy considerations

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