Postpartum Lived Experiences of Emerging Adult Mothers: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT: This hermeneutic phenomenological study investigates the lived experiences of emerging adult mothers during the postpartum period. The study focuses on understanding the emotional, physical, and social dimensions of their experiences and their perceptions of challenges, coping mechanisms, and the delicate balance between motherhood and educational responsibilities. Additionally, the study examines the support received from academic institutions and the overall transition to motherhood as a student. The research was conducted in a public university setting, involving interviews with seven participants who met the eligibility criteria. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and analyze key themes and patterns in the participants' experiences. The findings reveal several significant themes, including the challenges of managing academic demands and childcare responsibilities, financial struggles and available support systems, the impact on emotional and mental well-being, academic performance, support from educational institutions, and personal growth and resilience. These findings underscore the complexities faced by emerging adult mothers in balancing their academic pursuits with caregiving responsibilities and emphasize the need for adequate financial and emotional support. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of support from educational institutions and offers insights into the implications of these findings for enhancing the academic journey of emerging adult mothers.

KEYWORDS: hermeneutic phenomenology, postpartum experiences, emerging adult mothers, support from institutions, academic performance

INTRODUCTION

Transitioning into adulthood is a critical phase marked by significant personal, social, and developmental changes. For young women aged 18-25, this period, known as emerging adulthood, is characterized by a focus on academic and professional growth. However, for some individuals, the journey into adulthood intersects with the transformative experience of motherhood.

In the Philippines, the prevalence of early motherhood is a pressing issue, as indicated by statistics from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), revealing that 14.1 million Filipino women aged 15 to 49 were pregnant or already mothers in 2015. This statistic highlights the high likelihood of parenthood among Philippine students, emphasizing the importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by emerging adult mothers in pursuing their educational goals.

Research conducted by Sta. Abinales and Sta. Maria, published in the Journal of Family Issues, further sheds light on this phenomenon, demonstrating that 23.2% of college students in the Philippines bear the responsibility of raising at least one child. This finding highlights the significant proportion of emerging adult students who grapple with the dual roles of being a student and a mother.

Becoming a mother during emerging adulthood can profoundly affect academic achievement and career prospects. Previous studies have shown that student mothers often face difficulties balancing schoolwork with childcare responsibilities, compounded by financial constraints and inadequate social support (Bacigalupe & Askew, 2013). Furthermore, research has indicated that student mothers are more susceptible to dropping out than their non-parenting peers (Miller & Gault, 2016).

The postpartum period, characterized by physical, emotional, and identity adjustments, presents additional challenges for new mothers. Sleep deprivation, hormonal fluctuations, and newborn care can be particularly demanding for emerging adult mothers. Furthermore, the unique developmental challenges of emerging adulthood, such as financial instability, limited life experience, and social support, can intensify the postpartum experience, potentially increasing the vulnerability to depression and anxiety (Bayrampour et al., 2015).

While existing literature has contributed to our understanding of student mothers' experiences, there remains a paucity of research specifically focused on the postpartum lived experiences of emerging adult mothers. To provide comprehensive support

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and effective interventions, researchers and educational institutions must address this research gap and gain a deeper understanding of the postpartum lived experiences of emerging adult mothers. By recognizing and addressing this population's specific challenges, we can develop targeted strategies to promote their well-being, enhance their parenting abilities, and empower them to navigate the complexities of emerging adulthood while adapting to the demands of motherhood. Therefore, this study aims to address this research gap by utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to gain deep insights into the postpartum lived experiences of emerging adult mothers.

Furthermore, the findings will inform the development of targeted support programs and interventions aimed at promoting educational access and facilitating the achievement of personal and professional goals for emerging adult mothers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to describe and discover the postpartum lived experiences of emerging adult mothers. Specific research questions that served as a guide for the study included the following:

1. What are emerging adult mothers' experiences during the postpartum period, including their emotional, physical, and social experiences?
2. How do emerging adult mothers perceive and navigate the challenges they encounter postpartum, and what coping mechanisms do they employ?
3. How do emerging adult mothers describe their experiences of balancing motherhood and educational responsibilities, and what factors contribute to their perceived success or challenges?
4. What types of support do emerging adult mothers receive from their educational institutions, and how do these forms of support impact their postpartum experiences and educational outcomes?
5. What are the predominant themes and patterns that emerge from the postpartum lived experiences of emerging adult mothers, specifically regarding their transition to motherhood while being students?

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted within a public university setting, utilizing face-to-face interviews to explore the postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers. Suitable locations on campus were identified in collaboration with the university administration, and participants were given the freedom to choose a comfortable and private interview setting. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words. The study employed various recruitment strategies to attract a diverse range of participants. The eligibility criteria included being a mother enrolled in higher education, aged 18 to 25 years, and having given birth within the past 12 months. However, individuals with a history of mental illness, substance abuse, or conditions that could hinder their participation were excluded. The study acknowledged the limitations of limited sample size, potential bias in self-reported data, and the specific context of a public university setting. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers in balancing academic pursuits and caregiving responsibilities.

THEORETICAL LENS

This study did not rely on developed theories to explain postpartum experiences among emerging adult mothers. The researchers intended to approach the subject without preconceived notions and to remain unaffected by existing theories. To prevent data contamination, the researchers entered the field without prior knowledge of the study. They collected data through observations, direct contacts, and interviews to develop themes defining the phenomenon. The researchers believed that there must be something that can be explained and understood in a way that differs from currently established theories.

Philosophically, the study acknowledged the importance of philosophical presuppositions in qualitative research. The researchers recognized ontology, which views reality as multidimensional and subjective from the participants' perspective. They used quotes and themes to capture the complex and subjective nature of postpartum experiences among emerging adult mothers. The researchers established a collaborative and respectful relationship with participants, prioritizing proximity and adopting an insider role. They employed reflexive approaches to critically examine their assumptions and biases, ensuring unbiased data collection and analysis. Rhetorically, the researchers used personalized language choices to reflect their experiences and beliefs. Methodologically, they embraced a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, conducting detailed interviews and following established qualitative research principles. Throughout the study, the researchers valued participant experiences, conducted the research humanely and empathetically, and aimed to provide valuable insights while upholding rigorous standards.

METHOD

In the subsequent sections, this article will detail the research methodology, present the findings, and discuss their implications within the existing literature. By shedding light on the lived experiences of emerging adult mothers during the

postpartum period, this study seeks to provide a valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners interested in supporting the well-being and success of this unique population.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology to examine the postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers. Hermeneutic phenomenology, a qualitative research method, sought to comprehend how individuals experienced their lives (van Manen, 2014). The researchers conducted extensive one-on-one interviews with participants to collect comprehensive information about their experiences, including emotional reactions, coping strategies, and difficulties encountered during the postpartum period. The interview transcripts were carefully examined to identify significant themes and patterns. The researchers then interpreted the findings while remaining aware of their preconceptions, biases, and assumptions. This involved profoundly reflecting on the collected data and their experiences and perspectives. The study aimed to provide a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences within the context of the postpartum period.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The study utilized face-to-face interviews to gather data on postpartum experiences. A validated semi-structured interview guide that underwent a rigorous process, including expert review, pilot testing, and peer debriefing, was used. The researchers conducted interviews, actively listened, and asked open-ended questions. Verbatim transcription of audio recordings enabled comprehensive analysis. Adherence to research principles and validation of the interview guide ensured reliability and meaningful insights into the participants' experiences.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Seven participants, aged 19-21, were purposefully recruited to explore the postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, which refers to the point at which new information and themes no longer emerge from the data. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences without needing a larger sample size. Recruitment methods included social media, community centers, and word of mouth, and eligibility criteria were applied to ensure the participants represented the target population. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and detailed study information was provided.

GATHERING INFORMATION

To collect rich data, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted individually in a private setting. Open-ended questions let participants freely share their experiences and perspectives, while follow-up questions provide deeper insights. Throughout this process, we were mindful of minimizing biases, maintaining empathy, and remaining open-minded. Reflexivity and peer debriefing sessions were employed to ensure the reliability and rigor of our interpretations.

Guided by the hermeneutic circle, the data-gathering procedure emphasized understanding participants' experiences without imposing our interpretations. Verbatim transcriptions of all interviews and focus group discussions were obtained to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data.

For data analysis, we adopted thematic analysis, in line with hermeneutic phenomenology, to identify common themes and patterns, enhancing our understanding of the participants' postpartum lived experiences. This approach focused on interpreting the meaning and understanding of participants' experiences. It involved immersing ourselves in the data, identifying key themes, making connections, and utilizing the hermeneutic circle to delve more profound into comprehension. Following this systematic process, we aimed to unveil the richness and nuances of the participants' postpartum journeys.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The researchers diligently adhered to ethical protocols to ensure the integrity of the research process. Before their involvement, the emerging adult mothers were presented with consent letters that clearly outlined the study's objectives. These letters explicitly addressed confidentiality and the option to withdraw from participation. Ample time was provided for emerging adult mothers to consider their decision to participate in the study carefully.

Furthermore, the researchers upheld principles of fairness and justice throughout the research. Verbatim transcriptions of the gathered information were returned to the participants, allowing them to review and remove any information they deemed unnecessary. The study's findings were also shared with the participants, promoting transparency and inclusion. Considering the participant's convenience, flexibility was offered in scheduling the in-depth interviews, accommodating their preferred time and location.

Respecting the privacy of emerging adult mothers was of utmost importance. Throughout the study, the researchers ensured that the personal details of the participants remained confidential and undisclosed.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the results of a thematic analysis exploring the postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers. The analysis identified key themes that highlight the challenges faced by these mothers, including the balance between academic demands and childcare responsibilities, financial struggles, emotional and mental well-being, impact on academic performance, support from educational institutions, and personal growth and resilience. The discussion section will further examine these themes and their implications, drawing upon relevant literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of emerging adult mothers in the academic context.

RESULTS

The postpartum experiences of emerging adult mothers revealed a complex interplay of challenges, emotions, and coping mechanisms. Through in-depth interviews and analysis of the collected data, several key themes emerged, illuminating the participants' lived experiences during this transitional period.

Theme 1: Balancing Academic Demands and Childcare Responsibilities

Participants highlighted the difficulty of balancing the demands of school with taking care of their children. They expressed the challenges of time management and the need to prioritize their children's needs over their academic commitments. Participant 3 mentioned struggling to allocate time between school requirements and attending to their children's needs. At the same time, Participant 7 shared the constant juggling of feeding their child with special needs and attending classes, often sacrificing their meals. Participant 6 emphasized the challenges of staying up at night with a crying baby and attending school during the day, highlighting the physical and emotional toll it takes.

"I struggled to balance my time between complying with school requirements and caring for my children, who needed my attention. Sometimes, I had to set aside my schoolwork to meet my children's needs. Despite these challenges, I still found ways to complete my school requirements on time." (P3)

"At noon, after school, I will go home to feed my child with special needs, then feed my baby. I often do not eat because I have to go back to school." (P7)

"It is hard because you stay up at night because the baby will cry, then you go to school during the day. It takes a toll on you, both physically and emotionally." (P6)

Theme 2: Financial Struggles and Support Systems

Financial challenges were a common concern among the participants, as evident from their statements. Participant 1 shared,

"Although my own family and husband provided financial support, I was hurt when I found out that my husband cheated on me and had a child with his girlfriend."

They also discussed the expenses related to their child's health condition, stating, *"My baby's condition, having Hirschsprung's disease, sometimes required hospitalization, which added to our expenses. My husband is also a heavy drinker, which makes our financial situation even more challenging". Despite these struggles, Participant 1 acknowledged the support received from their own family, mentioning, "My elder sister was the one who encouraged me to pursue a course. She provided support along the way".*

Participant 6 expressed gratitude for their husband's support during postpartum depression, stating, *"My husband helped a lot. He is there to support me when I am experiencing postpartum depression. Every time I have a breakdown, he is always by my side. I am supported, comforted, and motivated".*

This statement highlights the importance of having a solid support system in managing financial and emotional burdens, especially during challenging times.

Theme 3: Emotional and Mental Well-being

Participants in the study opened up about their emotional and mental challenges while balancing academic demands and childcare responsibilities. Their statements shed light on the significant impact on their well-being. Participant 6 described their emotional struggles, stating,

"I get angry quickly, and cry suddenly, especially when I stay up too much."

This highlights the emotional volatility and vulnerability experienced due to sleep deprivation and the overwhelming responsibilities they faced. Moreover, Participant 6 sought professional help to cope with their mental health, sharing, *"I sought help from a health professional, including a psychiatrist, due to difficulty sleeping and racing thoughts."*

This statement underscores the severity of their mental challenges and the importance of seeking professional support to navigate them.

Participant 7 expressed their doubts and the mental strain they experienced, stating, *"I have many questions for myself. If I can still do it because it is complicated".*This statement reflects the self-doubt and emotional burden of managing multiple responsibilities, including caring for a child with special needs and a newborn. Throughout their statements, the participants conveyed the emotional toll of their journey as emerging adult mothers, emphasizing the need for adequate support and resources to address their emotional and mental well-being.

These participant statements provide valuable insights into emerging adult mothers' emotional and mental struggles and highlight the significance of addressing their well-being as an integral part of their academic journey.

Theme 4: Impact on Academic Performance

Several participants acknowledged the impact of being a student-parent on academic performance. Participant 2 noted,
"I noticed a decrease in my grades after I had a child compared to when I did not have one yet."
This statement highlights the recognition of a decline in academic performance following the responsibilities of parenthood.

Participant 3 shared their personal experience, stating*, "My grades suffered because my output was just for compliance purposes. I could not give it my all because my time was divided between being a mother and a student".* This statement emphasizes the challenges of dividing time and energy between motherhood and academic commitments, resulting in compromised academic performance.

The participants' statements collectively underscore the difficulties faced by emerging adult mothers in finding a balance between their roles as parents and students. The juggling act of meeting the needs of their children while striving to excel academically imposes significant challenges on their overall academic performance.

Theme 5: Support from Educational Institutions

Participants highlighted the importance of support from educational institutions in their journey as emerging adult mothers. They expressed gratitude to instructors who understood their situation and provided flexibility regarding deadlines and exams. Participant 3 shared, *"I am grateful that my instructor understood when I could not submit my requirements on time or take the exam on the scheduled date."*

This statement demonstrates the positive impact of understanding instructors who accommodate the unique challenges faced by emerging adult mothers.

However, some participants also mentioned a need for more specific support programs tailored to the needs of emerging adult mothers. Participant 6 and Participant 7 expressed their sentiments, with Participant 6 stating*, "Now, so far, I do not know of any school program that provides support for people like us."* These statements highlight the need for educational institutions to develop and implement support programs that address the specific needs and challenges emerging adult mothers face.

While participants acknowledged the support received from individual instructors, the lack of comprehensive and targeted support programs suggests an opportunity for educational institutions to enhance their support systems for emerging adult mothers. Educational institutions can better support emerging adult mothers' academic pursuits by providing dedicated resources, accommodations, and tailored programs.

Theme 6: Personal Growth and Resilience

Despite the challenges, participants demonstrated personal growth and resilience as emerging adult mothers. They expressed determination to continue their studies to better themselves and their children.

Participant 5 shared their commitment to prioritizing studying, stating, Even though I faced time constraints, I still prioritized studying because I wanted to become a professional and make my child proud." This statement reflects the participant's resilience and motivation to succeed in their academic endeavors, driven by the desire to create a better future for themselves and their child.

Participant 6 acknowledged the personal growth they experienced as a student-parent,
stating,*"I have changed a lot; I have become more mature, practical, and responsible. I also learned time management".* This statement highlights the participant's recognition of the transformative impact of their experiences, including the development of essential life skills such as maturity, practicality, responsibility, and effective time management.

These statements exemplify the personal growth and resilience demonstrated by the participants in the face of their unique challenges as emerging adult mothers. They showcase their determination to overcome obstacles, acquire valuable skills, and positively impact their and their children's lives. The journey of balancing parenthood and education has contributed to their personal development, fostering resilience and strength in the face of adversity. This theme emphasizes the transformative nature of the postpartum experience and the resilience exhibited by emerging adult mothers.

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This thematic analysis reveals the complex experiences of emerging adult mothers, encompassing the challenges of balancing academic demands and childcare responsibilities, financial struggles, emotional well-being, the impact on academic performance, the importance of support from educational institutions, and the personal growth and resilience exhibited throughout their journeys.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this thematic analysis provide valuable insights into the experiences of emerging adult mothers and shed light on the challenges they face in balancing their academic pursuits with their responsibilities as caregivers. The themes that emerged, including balancing academic demands and childcare responsibilities, financial struggles, emotional and mental well-being, impact on academic performance, support from educational institutions, and personal growth and resilience, highlight the multifaceted nature of the student-parent experience.

One of the key challenges emerging adult mothers face is the delicate balance between meeting the demands of their academic studies and fulfilling their childcare responsibilities. Participants shared the difficulties of managing their time effectively, often making difficult choices between attending to their children's needs and completing their academic requirements. This struggle aligns with previous research highlighting the time constraints and conflicting demands emerging adult mothers face (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Educational institutions should recognize the unique challenges faced by emerging adult mothers and consider implementing support systems, such as flexible scheduling and childcare services, to alleviate the burden of time management.

Financial challenges were a common concern among the participants, reflecting emerging adult mothers' broader economic struggles. The participants discussed the additional financial strain caused by various factors, such as family conflicts, the health conditions of their children, and limited financial resources. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes the financial difficulties faced by student-parents and the negative impact on their academic success (Gault et al., 2014). Institutions should consider implementing targeted financial assistance programs and scholarships tailored explicitly to emerging adult mothers to alleviate their financial burdens and ensure academic success.

Emerging adult mothers' emotional and mental well-being emerged as another significant theme.

Participants shared experiences of heightened emotional challenges, including anger, frustration, and sadness, often exacerbated by sleep deprivation and the immense responsibilities they shoulder. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the mental health struggles student-parents face (Nelson et al., 2019). Educational institutions must provide accessible mental health resources, counseling services, and peer support networks to help emerging adult mothers cope with the emotional demands of their roles.

The impact on academic performance was a common concern expressed by the participants. Many acknowledged a decline in their grades and academic achievements after becoming parents. This finding is consistent with existing research showing a negative association between parenting responsibilities and academic performance (Strage, 2008). Institutions should consider implementing academic support programs, such as tutoring services and academic advising, specifically tailored to the needs of emerging adult mothers to enhance their academic success and alleviate the pressures they face.

The participants expressed appreciation for supportive instructors and a desire for more comprehensive support from educational institutions. While some participants acknowledged instructors who showed understanding and flexibility regarding deadlines and exams, others highlighted a lack of specific support programs catering to the needs of emerging adult mothers. This indicates the importance of fostering a supportive institutional environment that recognizes and addresses the unique challenges faced by emerging adult mothers. Institutions should develop targeted support initiatives, such as mentorship programs, peer networks, and childcare facilities, to ensure the success and well-being of emerging adult mothers.

Despite the numerous challenges, the participants demonstrated remarkable personal growth and resilience. They are strongly determined to continue their studies to better themselves and their children. This resilience aligns with previous research that has shown the transformative effects of parenthood on individuals' motivation and personal development (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2012). Institutions should celebrate and support the personal growth of emerging adult mothers, fostering a culture of inclusivity, empowerment, and recognition of their unique strengths and capabilities.

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of emerging adult mothers, there are certain limitations to consider. The sample size was limited, and the findings must be more generalizable to all student-parent populations. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias. Future research should include a more extensive and diverse sample to capture broader experiences and perspectives.

In closing, the findings underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique needs of emerging adult mothers within educational institutions. By implementing targeted support programs, financial assistance, flexible scheduling options, and mental health resources, institutions can create a supportive environment that empowers emerging adult mothers to thrive academically, emotionally, and personally. Supporting emerging adult mothers benefits them individually and creates a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational institutions in providing support and creating an inclusive environment for emerging adult mothers who are also students. The following implications highlight the key areas that schools need to address:

1. Flexible Academic Scheduling*:* Educational institutions should recognize the challenges faced by student mothers in balancing academic responsibilities with their motherhood roles. It is crucial to offer flexible academic scheduling options, such as evening classes, online courses, or part-time study arrangements, to accommodate the needs of student mothers. This flexibility will enable them to fulfill their academic requirements while meeting parental responsibilities.

2. On-Campus Childcare Facilities: Accessible and affordable on-campus childcare facilities are vital in supporting student mothers. Educational institutions should invest in

The establishment of childcare centers that provide a safe and nurturing environment for children while their mothers attend classes or engage in academic activities. By providing reliable childcare options, schools can alleviate the burden of arranging external childcare and facilitate student-mothers' active participation in their education.

1. Lactation Support and Facilities: Educational institutions should prioritize providing appropriate lactation support and facilities. This includes designated lactation rooms equipped with comfortable seating, privacy, and necessary amenities for expressing milk. Supporting breastfeeding student mothers promotes their well-being and enables them to continue their education without compromising their parenting responsibilities.

2. Comprehensive Mental Health Services: Student-mothers may face heightened emotional and mental health challenges postpartum. Educational institutions should ensure the availability of comprehensive mental health services that address the specific needs of this population. This includes access to counseling, support groups, and mental health professionals who specialize in postpartum care. By providing these services, schools can support student-mothers in maintaining their mental well-being and academic success.

3. Sensitization and Training for Faculty and Staff: Faculty and staff members should receive sensitization and training to understand the unique experiences and challenges student mothers face. This training should focus on fostering empathy, providing appropriate support, and implementing inclusive practices in the classroom. By creating a supportive and understanding environment, educational institutions can enhance the academic success and well-being of student-mothers.

4. Peer Support and Networking: Establishing peer support programs and networking opportunities for student mothers can create community and camaraderie. Educational institutions should facilitate the formation of support groups or student organizations that cater specifically to the needs of student mothers. These platforms can provide emotional support, mentorship, and practical advice, fostering a supportive network among student mothers.

By addressing these implications, educational institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers emerging adult mothers to pursue their education while effectively navigating the challenges of motherhood. Implementing these measures will contribute to student-mothers' academic success and promote their well-being and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the experiences and challenges faced by emerging adult mothers who are also students, commonly known as student mothers. The findings highlight the delicate balance these individuals must strike between their academic responsibilities and their roles as mothers. The study's themes, including balancing academic demands and childcare responsibilities, financial struggles, emotional and mental well-being, impact on academic performance, support from educational institutions, and personal growth and resilience, provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of their experiences.

The implications drawn from these findings underscore the need for educational institutions to provide support and create an inclusive environment for student mothers. Flexible academic scheduling options can accommodate their unique needs, allowing them to fulfill their academic requirements while attending to their parental responsibilities. On-campus childcare facilities are vital in alleviating the burden of arranging external childcare and enabling active participation in education.

Addressing the financial challenges faced by student mothers is crucial. Educational institutions should consider providing support programs tailored to their needs, acknowledging the additional expenses they may incur due to their child's health conditions or other circumstances. Additionally, the study emphasizes the significance of mental health support for student mothers, highlighting the importance of comprehensive mental health services to address this population's emotional and mental well-being.

Educational institutions should also focus on sensitizing faculty and staff to the unique experiences and challenges student-mothers face. Providing appropriate support and implementing inclusive practices in the classroom can contribute to the academic success and overall well-being of student-mothers.

Furthermore, establishing peer support programs and networking opportunities can foster community and provide much-needed emotional support and mentorship.

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By implementing these implications, educational institutions can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers emerging adult mothers to pursue their education while effectively navigating the challenges of motherhood. Supporting student mothers promotes their academic success and enhances their overall well-being and personal growth.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The findings are based on a specific sample and may only partially capture the diverse experiences of all student mothers. Future research should include a more diverse range of participants to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by student mothers and the potential solutions that educational institutions can implement.

In conclusion, this study serves as a starting point for raising awareness and promoting changes within educational institutions to support better-emerging adult mothers who are also students. By addressing the identified implications, educational institutions can create an environment where student-mothers can thrive academically while effectively fulfilling their caregiver roles. Ultimately, this will contribute to the empowerment and success of student mothers, benefiting both the individuals and their families.

REFLECTIONS

Throughout this study, the researchers were privileged to engage with remarkable individuals who shared their deeply personal postpartum experiences as emerging adult mothers. The process of conducting this research using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach allowed us to delve into the participants' stories, uncovering the richness and complexity of their lived experiences. In this section, we reflect on our research journey and the insights gained from this study.

First and foremost, we acknowledge the immense trust and vulnerability displayed by the participants as they openly shared their joys, struggles, and aspirations. Their willingness to participate in this study provided a unique opportunity for us to gain firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by emerging adult mothers who are also students. The participants' narratives served as a powerful reminder of the resilience, determination, and sacrifices exhibited by these individuals in their pursuit of motherhood and education.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was invaluable in understanding the essence and meanings of the participants' experiences. By immersing ourselves in their narratives and engaging in the reflective interpretation process, we uncovered the underlying themes that characterized their postpartum journey. This approach enabled us to move beyond surface-level descriptions and delve into the deeper layers of their experiences, capturing the nuances and complexities of their lived realities.

One of the most striking aspects of this study was the interconnectedness of the participants' challenges, support systems, academic performance, and emotional well-being. The emerging themes were not isolated phenomena but intricately intertwined elements that shaped their postpartum experiences. The findings reinforced the importance of adopting a holistic and multidimensional perspective when examining the lives of emerging adult mothers who are also students.

Moreover, the participants' narratives were a stark reminder of the systemic barriers and inequalities within educational institutions and society. The financial struggles, lack of support structures, and stigmatization experienced by these individuals highlighted the need for comprehensive policies and interventions to support their educational pursuits. The findings of this study provide a compelling case for institutions to reevaluate their practices, policies, and support systems to create an inclusive and empowering environment for student mothers.

As researchers, we recognize the limitations of our study. The small sample size and specific demographic characteristics of the participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the rich and in-depth nature of the data obtained through the hermeneutic phenomenological approach compensates for these limitations, as it provides a detailed understanding of the participants' unique experiences. Future research endeavors should include a more diverse range of participants to capture the full spectrum of experiences among emerging adult student mothers.

In closing, conducting this study has been transformative for the researchers. We have gained a deeper appreciation for the resilience and strength of emerging adult mothers who simultaneously navigate the complexities of motherhood and education. The participants' narratives will continue to resonate with us as a constant reminder of the importance of supporting and advocating for the needs of this population. We hope this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge, informs policy and practice, and ultimately foster a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape for emerging adult mothers.

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