International Journal of Social Science and Human Research

ISSN (print): 2644-0679, ISSN (online): 2644-0695

Volume 09 Issue 05 May 2026

DOI: 10.47191/ijsshr/v9-i5-97, Impact factor- 8.361

Page No: 4316-4325

Earning While Learning: The Travails of Working Students Through Basic Education

Shella May S. Segovia[1], Rael Christopher O. Plaza, Ed.D[2]

[1]Datu Lipus Mkapandong National High School, Poblaaion, Rosario Agusan del Sur, Philippines

[2]North Eastern Mindanao State University, Graduate School, Tandag City, Surigao del Sur, Philippines

ABSTRACT: Working students in economically constrained communities often navigate overlapping demands of schooling and labor. This study explored the lived experiences of working learners at Datu Lipus Makapandong National High School, Rosario, Agusan del Sur, Philippines. Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, in-depth interviews were conducted with seventeen working students (Grades 7–12) and analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Colaizzi's approach. Findings show that poverty drives early work participation, producing time scarcity, fatigue, and academic strain, while also fostering maturity, responsibility, and hope. Students described emotional burdens (stress, anxiety, isolation) moderated by family/peer support, teacher flexibility, and personal meaning-making (faith, reflection, prioritization). Seven interrelated themes surfaced: poverty as catalyst of dual roles; work–school navigation; inner growth through labor; emotional toll and resilience; support systems and gaps; coping and meaning-making; and resilience and aspirations. The study underscores the need for school-based, context-responsive support (flexible academic arrangements, psychosocial services, targeted assistance, and stronger family–community collaboration) to protect learner welfare and sustain participation.

KEYWORDS: working students; lived experiences; resilience; labor and education; school–work balance; phenomenology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Working learners in economically constrained communities often carry overlapping demands of schooling and labor. When work hours and task intensity increase, student employment is frequently associated with reduced study time, fatigue, and weaker academic outcomes (Perna & Odle, 2020; Kroupová et al., 2024). In the Philippines, working students commonly report attendance challenges, limited focus, and difficulty completing requirements due to livelihood responsibilities (Autida, 2023; Galleto, 2022).

At the same time, working can provide practical skills and early maturity, especially when students manage earnings for transportation, school supplies, and family support. Yet these benefits often coexist with psychosocial costs, including stress, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Li et al., 2021; Mukhtar, 2020). This dual reality suggests that working learners are not simply "busy students" but young people navigating role strain under structural constraints.

Child labor remains a pressing concern and can disrupt schooling, particularly under poverty and crisis conditions (International Labour Organization & UNICEF, 2025; Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). While broader reports quantify the scope of the problem, fewer studies foreground how secondary students in rural public schools interpret and manage their dual roles—an important gap for designing context-responsive supports.

This study explored the lived experiences of working students at Datu Lipus Makapandong National High School (D.O. Plaza, Avenue, Poblacion,Rosario, Agusan del Sur), the supports they perceive from the school community and family, and the implications for a school-based intervention program that can help sustain participation and well-being.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The dual roles of academic and employment responsibilities significantly strain working students, negatively impacting their academic performance, attendance, and overall well-being. This strain is exacerbated by the need to fulfill basic physiological and safety needs through employment, often at the expense of higher-level psychological needs such as self-esteem and educational achievement. Additionally, working with students' social environment and self-efficacy beliefs is crucial in managing these dual roles and coping with the associated challenges. Hence, this study is anchored to the Role Strain Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Social Cognitive Theory.

Role Strain Theory, proposed by sociologist William J. Goode, provides a lens to understand the stress and strain experienced by individuals facing conflicting demands from multiple roles (Nickerson, 2023). In the context of working students, this theory is particularly relevant as it highlights the challenges associated with balancing academic responsibilities and employment. The dual roles of being a student and an employee can create significant role strain, leading to issues such as time management difficulties, emotional stress, and decreased academic performance. Moreover, this theory posits that individuals develop strategies to cope with the stress and strain arising from their multiple roles (Hopper, 2020). By understanding these strategies, this study can provide insights into how students mitigate the adverse effects of role strain and maintain a balance between their academic and work commitments.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a psychological theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. It outlines a five-tier model of human needs. These needs are often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid, with physiological (survival) needs at the bottom and the more creative and intellectually oriented 'self-actualization' needs at the top (Cherry, 2024). Maslow also argued that basic survival needs must be met before an individual can address higher-level needs (McLeod, 2024).

For many working students, fulfilling basic physiological and safety needs, such as food, shelter, and financial stability, is a primary motivator for seeking employment. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a framework for examining how the pursuit of employment to satisfy these basic needs can hinder the ability of working students to achieve higher-level needs. For instance, the time and energy devoted to work can detract from academic efforts, impeding the attainment of educational goals and diminishing opportunities for personal growth and self-actualization. Thus, integrating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs with Role Strain Theory can provide a more holistic understanding of the lived experiences of working students. While the Role Strain Theory elucidates the stress and challenges of juggling multiple roles, Maslow's theory explains the underlying motivations that drive students to take on these roles despite the potential negative impacts.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is a psychological framework emphasizing the importance of observational learning, self-efficacy, and goal-setting in developing behaviors and attitudes (Nickerson, 2024). According to this theory, individuals learn and develop behaviors by observing others, significantly influencing their actions and decisions (LaMorte, 2022). In the context of working students, Social Cognitive Theory provides valuable insights into how their social environment and personal beliefs influence their ability to manage dual roles and cope with associated challenges. By seeing how others successfully navigate similar challenges, working students can adopt similar behaviors and strategies, which can help them mitigate the stress and strain associated with their dual roles.

Integrating Social Cognitive Theory with Role Strain Theory allows for a comprehensive analysis of the external influences and personal beliefs that impact working students' academic and work-related behaviors. While Role Strain Theory highlights the stress and challenges of conflicting roles, Social Cognitive Theory offers insights into how students learn to manage these roles through observation, self-efficacy, and goal-setting. This can lead to the identification of effective interventions that enhance observational learning opportunities, boost self-efficacy, and promote goal-setting practices. Ultimately, this comprehensive understanding can inform the development of targeted support mechanisms that help working students balance their academic and employment responsibilities more effectively, reducing role strain and improving their overall well-being and academic outcomes.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of working students and to understand how they make meaning of their dual roles as learners and workers within their local socio-economic context. It was conducted at Datu Lipus Makapandong National High School (DLMNHS) in Rosario, Agusan del Sur, Philippines. The participants were seventeen (17) working students from Grades 7 to 12 who were purposively selected based on the inclusion criteria; all were below 18 years old and engaged in paid or income-generating work while enrolled in school. A semi-structured interview guide, reviewed by field experts for clarity and relevance, was used in gathering the data. After securing the necessary school and division-level permissions, the researcher coordinated with teacher-advisers to identify qualified participants and obtained informed consent from both the participants and their parents or guardians. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, while observations and contextual documents, such as school records and teacher reports, were also utilized to enrich the data. The interview responses were transcribed verbatim, including relevant nonverbal cues, and were analyzed through thematic analysis guided by Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes and subthemes, and synthesizing the essence of the participants' experiences. Ethical safeguards were strictly observed, particularly because the study involved minors and vulnerable participants. The researcher employed noninvasive interview procedures, ensured privacy and confidentiality, monitored participants for possible discomfort, and clearly explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. A debriefing process was also conducted after data collection to promote transparency, trust, and emotional safety among the participants.

Table 1 presents the key informants of the study. Their names were represented with an Alias to affirm confidentiality.

TABLE I. Participants' Profile

Pseudonym	*Description*
1. Toto	13-year-old Grade 7 student who sells vegetables with his mother after school; seldom absent.
2. Dodong	16-year-old Grade 11 student working in a palm oil plantation; formerly a water delivery helper; attends school 2–3 days a week.
3. Juan	16-year-old Grade 11 student working in a palm oil plantation; formerly a water delivery helper; attends school 2–3 days a week.
4. Estong	14-year-old Grade 8 student engaged in heavy labor in palm oil areas due to his father's illness.
5. Janjan	16-year-old Grade 11 student working in palm oil plantations to help support his family.
6. Loloy	16-year-old Grade 11 student working as a panday helper for his father to meet school and personal needs.
7. Ondoy	16-year-old Grade 11 student who does river gold panning on weekends for family support.
8. Nene	15-year-old Grade 10 stay-in domestic worker supporting herself; regularly present with fair academic performance.
9. Tonyo	16-year-old Grade 11 student engaged in peddling to help cover his mother's medical expenses.
10. Reneboy	12-year-old Grade 7 student working in mining areas and doing errands to augment family income.
11. Inday	16-year-old Grade 9 student employed in a local bakery to support herself and her family.
12. Jose	13-year-old Grade 7 student working with his father in a palm oil plantation to meet basic needs.
13. Pedro	17-year-old Grade 10 student working as a panday helper and laborer due to financial hardship.
14. Pablo	16-year-old Grade 10 student engaged in palm oil labor, including fruit harvesting, to support his family.
15. James	15-year-old Grade 9 student working in construction and other labor jobs.
16. Boyet	17-year-old Grade 12 student who has been a working student since Grade 7.
17. Kokoy	15-year-old Grade 8 student working for a distant relative and living away from his family.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Seven interconnected themes emerged from participants' accounts (Table II). Together, the findings show that work is primarily necessity-driven and creates persistent time scarcity, yet students also develop maturity and a strong future orientation through education.

TABLE II. Summary of Emergent Themes and Subthemes from the Participants' Narratives on their Lived Experiences

Major Themes	*Sub Themes*
Poverty as a Catalyst for Dual Roles	Economic Hardship as Primary Motivation
	Familial Obligation and Gratitude
Navigating the Demands of Work and School	Time Conflicts and Exhaustion
	Academic Sacrifices
	Adaptive Academic Strategies
Inner Growth through Labor	Pride in Earning and Independence
	Financial Literacy and Budgeting Skills
	Maturation Through Responsibility
Emotional Toll and Resilience	Psychological Distress and Burnout
	Social Isolation and Exclusion

	Quiet Struggles and Emotional Coping
Support Systems and Gaps	Family as Emotional and Practical Support
	Peer Collaboration and Solidarity
	Lack of Institutional Flexibility and Aid
Coping Mechanisms and Meaning-Making.	Time and Task Management
	Emotional and Spiritual Anchoring
	Meaning-Making and Future Orientation
Resilience and Aspirations	Perseverance Amid Hardship
	Inspirational Role Models and Family Drive
	Educational Dreams as a Path Out of Poverty

Theme 1: Poverty as a Catalyst for Dual Roles

This theme captures the foundational condition shaping the lifeworld of high school working students: poverty. Across the narratives of Loloy, Toto, Juan, Nene, Dodong, Reneboy, Tonyo, and Estong, economic hardship is not a distant backdrop but a structuring reality that initiates and sustains the dual identity of learner and worker. Work is experienced not as preference but as necessity—undertaken to secure food, meet school-related needs, and stabilize family life. Phenomenologically, poverty functions as a grounding structure of meaning, shaping how students interpret obligation, responsibility, and survival within everyday school experience. This framing aligns with research that positions poverty as a force that reorganizes daily priorities and accelerates role assumption among economically vulnerable youth (Di Pietro, 2023; Verulava & Jorbenadze, 2022).

The accounts of Loloy, Toto, Tonyo, Dodong, Juan, Nene, Estong, and Reneboy consistently portray labor as a direct response to recurring material needs—daily sustenance, school supplies, allowances, and household expenses. Scarcity is experienced as persistent, requiring continuous action rather than occasional adjustment. This mirrors evidence that students from low-income households engage in informal or precarious work primarily to meet immediate needs rather than to pursue advancement or enrichment (Di Pietro, 2023; Verulava & Jorbenadze, 2022).

Consistent with local findings that Filipino learners enter the workforce to augment household income under conditions of economic precarity (Galleto, 2022; Autida, 2023), poverty in this study becomes the organizing force that structures priorities, time, and energy—linking work with survival rather than choice. Loloy and Toto's accounts echo literature framing student labor as necessity-driven, where employment functions as a survival response rather than a developmental opportunity (Maliao et al., 2023). In everyday school life, this necessity is experienced concretely: for Juan, responsibility is not symbolic—it becomes daily budgeting and repeated decisions between attendance and earnings, demonstrating how poverty shapes not only why students work but also how they participate in schooling.

Learners also imbue work with relational meaning. Loloy, Toto, Dodong, Juan, Estong, Janjan, and Inday frame labor as love, reciprocity, and gratitude rather than mere burden. This aligns with collectivist orientations in which educational motivation is deeply tied to family welfare and shared survival (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2021). At the same time, family emerges as a double-edged force—both a source of emotional grounding and a source of pressure. While familial support can buffer stress and sustain persistence, expectations also intensify responsibility, particularly when students feel morally obligated to succeed for the household (Suud et al., 2024; Tus et al., 2022).In this sense, labor becomes an ethical commitment: participants view themselves not only as recipients of care but as contributors to household stability, reinforcing dignity amid constraint.While poverty initiates entry into labor, its consequences become most visible in the daily coordination of time, energy, and attendance—where work and school increasingly collide, setting the conditions for the challenges explored in the succeeding themes.

Theme 2: Navigating the Demands of Work and School

This theme describes the structural tension within participants' lifeworlds as they attempt to meet school expectations under labor constraints. In the experiences of Dodong, Toto, Juan, and Ondoy, learners confront competing temporal rhythms—school time versus work time—where institutional schedules remain fixed while work demands are irregular and urgent. Phenomenologically, this creates a lived experience of time pressure, where the day is organized around survival tasks rather than educational pacing. Across narratives, a clear mechanism emerges: work demands lead to sleep loss and fatigue, which in turn reduce classroom participation and culminate in academic sacrifice. This sequence reflects established findings that prolonged work hours disrupt sleep and study time, ultimately undermining engagement and performance (Perna & Odle, 2020; Race et al., 2020; Almarzouki et al., 2022). Rather than signaling low motivation, diminished participation often reflects cumulative exhaustion.

Chronic fatigue is evident in the narratives of Dodong, Toto, Juan, and Ondoy, whose work begins early, demands physical labor, and limits rest. These conditions produce lateness, partial attendance, and frequent absences, making exhaustion an

embodied constant in daily life. This aligns with evidence that sleep deprivation and extended work hours significantly impair classroom engagement and cognitive functioning among working students (Race et al., 2020; Almarzouki et al., 2022). In this structure, attendance becomes contingent—repeatedly negotiated against economic need.

Time scarcity—rather than lack of commitment—emerges as the core constraint shaping participation, consistent with research identifying reduced study time and fatigue as central pathways linking employment to academic decline (Kroupová et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2023). Ondoy's fatigue shows up most visibly as chronic lateness, while Juan's manifests in partial attendance following night or early-morning work shifts.

As time and energy are diverted toward labor, academic participation erodes in the experiences of Inday, Nene, Kokoy, Boyet, James, and Dodong through missed assignments, incomplete tasks, reduced concentration, and at times temporary withdrawal or repetition. These patterns echo findings that work–school conflict undermines persistence when institutional flexibility is limited (Perna & Odle, 2020; Summers et al., 2023).

Importantly, these sacrifices are not isolated events but a cumulative narrowing of educational opportunity, where repeated fatigue and absences gradually constrain learning progression—a process similarly identified in studies linking employment intensity to declining academic performance and extended completion timelines (Kroupová et al., 2024; Tumin et al., 2020). Inday's struggle is seen in incomplete outputs, while James experiences academic sacrifice through reduced concentration and declining classroom participation—illustrating how academic erosion unfolds incrementally rather than abruptly.

Despite constraint, learners enact agency by developing strategies to remain enrolled. The coping patterns of Toto, Juan, Estong, Janjan, Inday, James, and Pedro show improvised academic survival—maximizing focus during limited attendance, studying late, prioritizing tasks on non-working days, and relying on peer assistance.These behaviors reflect self-regulated learning processes—goal setting, strategic planning, monitoring, and effort adjustment—identified as critical mechanisms for sustaining academic performance under constraint (Xu et al., 2023; Sebullen et al., 2023). Resilience here is not a static trait but a set of enacted strategies shaped by necessity. Students did not remove the conflict; they managed it behaviorally to remain academically functional despite fatigue.

For James, resilience appears as strict task prioritization; for Toto, it is studying in short bursts between work shifts.Yet work was not defined solely by depletion; within hardship, students also described moments of growth and emerging self-worth—revealing how resilience is practiced behaviorally in everyday school life rather than merely possessed as an internal characteristic.

Theme 3: Inner Growth Through Labor

This theme highlights how labor, while burdensome, also became a site where learners constructed meanings of independence, capability, and maturity. In the narratives of Loloy, Toto, Juan, Estong, and Janjan, work contributes to identity formation—transforming them from dependents into contributors. Phenomenologically, labor becomes not only a demand but also a medium through which the self is experienced as capable and responsible. At the same time, this growth unfolds alongside persistent strain, reflecting scholarly views that development and deprivation often coexist rather than occur separately, particularly in contexts of economic necessity (Burnette et al., 2023; Randhawa et al., 2025).

Learners such as Loloy, Toto, Juan, Estong, and Janjan describe pride in contributing to family needs and reducing dependence on parents. Earning, even in small amounts, produces dignity and self-worth—redefining identity toward usefulness and agency. This pattern aligns with evidence that necessity-driven work can strengthen self-efficacy, responsibility, and personal agency, even when it arises from constraint rather than choice (Grozev & Easterbrook, 2024; Aton et al., 2024).For Juan, earning money becomes a source of confidence and validation—proof that he can contribute meaningfully to his household—while simultaneously carrying the pressure of sustaining this role alongside schooling. His experience illustrates how empowerment and burden are intertwined within labor-based growth.

Practical financial competence is visible in Dodong, Juan, Nene, and Boyet, who demonstrate budgeting, prioritizing necessities, saving, and reinvesting earnings. These skills emerge through lived engagement with money rather than formal instruction, consistent with recent findings that young workers may develop adaptive money management, responsibility, and personal agency through direct economic participation (Aton et al., 2024).

Their budgeting strategies mirror recent research showing that financial planning and disciplined resource management function as survival-oriented skills that support persistence in schooling under economic strain (Aton et al., 2024; Burnette et al., 2023). For these learners, managing limited earnings is not abstract financial literacy but a daily practice directly tied to remaining enrolled.

Responsibility accelerates emotional growth among Jose, Pedro, Pablo, James, and Kokoy, whose experiences indicate early discipline, empathy, and long-term thinking. This reflects adaptive maturity shaped by necessity, where hardship speeds development and strengthens accountability (Verulava & Jorbenadze, 2022). However, this maturation is often accelerated at the cost of rest, leisure, and peer life—highlighting the same growth–strain duality noted in contemporary literature on working youth (Randhawa et al., 2025).

While Juan's maturity is expressed through confidence gained from earning, Kokoy's maturity is paired with loss—fewer moments for play, rest, and social belonging—underscoring that growth in this context is rarely free of sacrifice.However, the gains of responsibility and competence carry an affective cost that often remains unseen, foreshadowing the emotional toll explored in the next theme.

Theme 4: Emotional Toll and Resilience

This theme reveals the affective underside of dual roles. Beneath perseverance, learners such as Loloy, Toto, Dodong, and Inday describe stress and emotional fatigue often borne privately. Phenomenologically, emotional burden appears as a background mood shaping daily experience—an enduring pressure that colors how students interpret school, work, and self-worth. Research on working learners similarly describes this condition as emotional invisibility, where students remain physically present in school but emotionally detached due to sustained exhaustion and strain (Race et al., 2020; Summer et al., 2023). Because this burden is rarely verbalized, emotional distress often remains unnoticed within school spaces.

Burnout and distress are evident in Loloy, Toto, Dodong, and Inday, whose narratives show cumulative depletion and emotional overload. Fatigue builds through repeated cycles of work, limited rest, and academic pressure rather than through a single crisis. In school contexts, this exhaustion is sometimes misinterpreted as disengagement, laziness, or lack of effort rather than recognized as a response to sustained strain. This pattern is consistent with findings that working students face heightened vulnerability to psychological distress and burnout when mental health support and psychosocial services within schools are limited or inaccessible (Lee et al., 2021; Summer et al., 2023). Behavioral signs such as withdrawal, low participation, or declining performance thus reflect accumulated stress rather than diminished motivation.

Social disconnection surfaces strongly in Kokoy, Boyet, and Inday, whose responsibilities limit peer interaction and participation in school life. Missed group activities, reduced classroom interaction, and absence from informal peer spaces intensify feelings of difference and exclusion. For Kokoy and Boyet, this isolation narrows their sense of belonging, which in turn weakens classroom participation and emotional engagement—patterns widely associated with reduced academic involvement and well-being among working students (Summer et al., 2023; Verulava & Jorbenadze, 2022). Social exclusion therefore becomes not only an emotional experience but also a mechanism through which school engagement gradually erodes.

Emotional coping is often internalized, as seen in Ondoy, Nene, Estong, Kokoy, and Inday, who rely on prayer, reflection, self-talk, and emotional suppression to manage distress. This pattern aligns with emotion-focused coping strategies commonly adopted when external resources are scarce (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and is reinforced by more recent evidence indicating that prolonged stress among students encourages inward coping that prioritizes endurance over emotional expression (Li et al., 2021). Inday's coping is notably quiet—distress is present but hidden—making it less likely to be recognized or addressed by teachers even as emotional strain continues to shape her school experience. While these strategies help sustain day-to-day functioning, they also conceal unmet emotional needs that remain largely unsupported.

In responding to strain, students turned toward available relationships; the next theme examines where support was present—and where it remained absent.

Theme 5: Support Systems and Gaps

This theme maps the social ecology surrounding working students. Support is most clearly experienced through family and peer relationships, as reflected in the accounts of Toto, Juan, Estong, and Pablo, while institutional support is described as limited, inconsistent, or inaccessible by Loloy, Ondoy, and Pedro. Phenomenologically, students' capacity to cope is sustained primarily by informal networks rather than by formal school structures. This pattern reflects broader evidence that support for working students is often relational, unevenly distributed, and contingent on personal circumstances rather than guaranteed by policy (Tan & Lee, 2021; Verulava & Jorbenadze, 2022; Aton et al., 2024). As a result, support becomes situational rather than systematic, leaving students vulnerable when informal buffers weaken.

Family support is central in the accounts of Toto, Juan, Estong, and Pablo, providing encouragement, shared responsibility, and moral direction that sustain school persistence despite exhaustion and financial strain. Families offer practical help—such as sharing chores, preparing meals, or offering emotional reassurance—that enables students to continue schooling under constrained conditions. Research affirms family support as a protective factor for disadvantaged learners' continuity (Tan & Lee, 2021). However, this support is dependent on household capacity and circumstance, making it uneven and fragile; when families themselves are under strain, students are left with fewer buffers against academic and emotional overload.

Peer support emerges in the experiences of Inday and James, where classmates provide academic scaffolding through shared notes, explanations, reminders, and informal mentoring during periods of absence or fatigue. These peer relationships function as compensatory supports when institutional accommodations are limited. Empirical literature indicates that peer scaffolding and mentoring sustain engagement and persistence among working students by maintaining connection to academic routines despite disrupted attendance (Perna & Odle, 2020). Similar to evidence that emotional support from family and friends strengthens positive coping and resilience among learners (Mai et al., 2021), peer solidarity mitigates isolation and disengagement. For Inday, peer assistance becomes a practical bridge that keeps her academically connected even when work demands interrupt regular classroom participation.

Institutional gaps are most evident in the narratives of Loloy, Ondoy, and Pedro, who report limited access to financial assistance, guidance services, and flexible academic policies. While individual teachers may demonstrate kindness or personal consideration, participants describe the absence of structured, school-wide mechanisms that acknowledge their dual roles. These experiences align with studies showing that institutional rigidity and bureaucratic barriers intensify work–school conflict and push students toward individual coping rather than collective support (Perna & Odle, 2020; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Consistent with observations that systemic shortcomings—such as limited scholarships, transportation support, and academic flexibility—continue to marginalize economically disadvantaged learners (Galleto, 2022; Autida, 2023), policy inflexibility compounds disadvantage. For Pedro, the gap is not the absence of kindness—it is the absence of structure.

With support often informal, inconsistent, and incomplete, learners rely heavily on self-generated strategies to stabilize routines and preserve meaning. This pattern highlights how resilience among working students is cultivated in response to support gaps rather than enabled by institutional design, revealing a persistent mismatch between students' lived realities and the systems intended to support them.

Theme 6: Coping Mechanisms and Meaning-Making

This theme emphasizes how learners actively constructed stability within hardship. Students such as Juan, Loloy, Dodong, Janjan, and James organized time to keep both roles possible, while Inday, Kokoy, Loloy, and Tonyo anchored emotions through spirituality and reflection. Phenomenologically, coping appears as intentional work to preserve coherence in a lifeworld shaped by constraint—an ongoing effort to prevent fragmentation between school demands and survival responsibilities. This framing aligns with contemporary views of coping as a dynamic, appraisal-based process shaped by continuous negotiation of competing academic and economic demands rather than a fixed response to stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Li et al., 2021).

Time strategies are evident in Juan, Loloy, Dodong, Janjan, and James, including alternating schedules, prioritizing tasks, studying within limited windows, and completing schoolwork during moments between labor demands. Such self-regulatory behaviors are crucial for persistence in constrained environments (Sebullen et al., 2023). Across studies on working learners, disciplined time management consistently emerges as a survival-oriented coping response rather than an optional academic skill, particularly when formal accommodations are absent (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). These strategies demonstrate that resilience is enacted through planning, prioritizing, and continual adjustment rather than assumed as a stable personality trait. In this sense, self-regulation becomes directly linked to persistence: the capacity to manage time determines whether students remain enrolled and academically functional despite constraint.

Emotional anchoring appears in Inday, Kokoy, Loloy, and Tonyo, who rely on prayer, reflection, informal guidance, and endurance practices to manage emotional strain. Faith-based and reflective coping practices are commonly used by working students to manage emotional strain and sustain a sense of purpose amid hardship (Fontanilla, 2022; Li et al., 2021).Within participants' narratives, spirituality functions not as a solution to poverty or workload, but as an emotional stabilizer—an anchor that allows them to endure exhaustion and uncertainty without losing hope. This pattern is consistent with evidence that meaning-focused and emotion-focused coping can buffer psychological overload while leaving structural stressors intact (Li et al., 2021). For Inday, coping is quiet; distress is present but steadied through reflection rather than publicly expressed, making it less visible within the school setting. These practices sustain emotional balance, yet they do not eliminate the conditions that generate strain.

Learners such as Nene, Jose, and Pedro reframe hardship as purposeful—interpreting work as preparation for future stability and family upliftment. Their narratives show that motivation is sustained through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as articulated in contemporary self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Purpose becomes the bridge between present sacrifice and imagined future possibility. Consistent with qualitative evidence on working students, meaning-making enables learners to cognitively reorganize hardship so that it becomes intelligible rather than chaotic, thereby supporting endurance under prolonged stress (Mesra et al., 2021; Sebullen et al., 2023). Nene's meaning-making is not abstract; it is a daily decision to endure today so tomorrow remains possible.

However, while coping strategies sustain functioning, they have limits. When self-regulation, spirituality, and meaning-making are not reinforced by institutional flexibility or structural support, exhaustion accumulates and well-being deteriorates. Research consistently cautions that coping cannot substitute for systemic reform; overreliance on individual adjustment in the absence of supportive school structures risks transforming resilience into prolonged survival rather than sustainable adaptation (Wojciechowska, 2020; Kerr & Cabral, 2023). Without institutional scaffolding, resilience becomes stretched to its limits.

Meaning-making ultimately orients learners beyond the present; the final theme reveals how aspiration and hope emerge as sustaining forces within ongoing constraint.

Theme 7: Resilience and Aspirations

This theme foregrounds the future-directed horizon of participants' lived experience. Despite hardship, learners such as Jose, Kokoy, and Pablo sustained perseverance, while Reneboy, Janjan, Tonyo, and Pedro drew aspiration from family meaning. Phenomenologically, aspiration functions as a forward-looking structure of meaning that keeps present struggle intelligible and endurable. Across narratives, hope is not abstract optimism but a practical orientation that enables students to remain engaged in schooling even when daily survival demands compete with long-term goals. This interpretation is supported by studies indicating

that resilience and aspirations serve as sustaining forces for persistence among economically constrained learners, particularly when education is perceived as a route toward mobility and improved life chances (Alarilla & Kintanar, 2024; Maliao et al., 2023; Remenick & Bergman, 2021).

Perseverance is evident in Jose, Kokoy, and Pablo, who repeatedly recommit to schooling despite fatigue, academic setbacks, and emotional strain. Their persistence reflects more than personal grit; it operates as a response to structural inequality that threatens educational continuity. Aspiration here functions as psychological fuel—sustaining effort, attendance, and commitment even when conditions discourage persistence. This aligns with evidence that future-oriented goals and resilience help learners endure constraint by giving hardship purpose rather than finality, particularly in high-stress educational contexts (Alarilla & Kintanar, 2024; Warshawski, 2022).Consistent with Bishop et al. (2020), perseverance among disadvantaged youth emerges as an adaptive response shaped by socioeconomic context rather than an innate trait. For these students, continuing school becomes an act of resistance enacted through everyday endurance.

Family-driven aspiration shapes the narratives of Reneboy, Janjan, Tonyo, and Pedro, where parents and siblings become motivational anchors reinforcing sacrifice and hope. Learners often express a desire to "give back" or to alter their family's circumstances through education. This finding aligns with research emphasizing that resilience and aspirations among working students are frequently tied to family motivation, perseverance, and the desire to improve life conditions, where success is imagined not only for the self but for the household (Alarilla & Kintanar, 2024; Galleto, 2022). However, this family drive also carries pressure. While support provides emotional grounding, expectations can intensify responsibility—particularly when students feel obligated to succeed not only for themselves but for their families. Similar dual effects of family support—as both protective and demanding—have been documented in studies on working learners navigating economic hardship (Autida, 2023; Bishop et al., 2020).

Education is framed as a route to stability by participants such as Loloy, Tonyo, Nene, Inday, Ondoy, and James, reflecting aspiration as an intentional strategy rather than passive hope. Schooling represents imagined escape from insecurity, a means to secure dignified work, and a promise of improved family life. These aspirations allow students to reinterpret present suffering as temporary and meaningful. This interpretation is supported by evidence showing that working students often persist in schooling because education is perceived as a pathway toward improved life chances, future stability, and family upliftment (Remenick & Bergman, 2021; Wojciechowska, 2020; Di Pietro, 2023).However, how such aspirations are built, sustained, and reshaped within everyday high school life—amid fatigue, missed classes, and limited institutional support—remains underexplored. While existing literature documents outcomes and motivations, fewer studies capture how aspirations are actively maintained under daily constraint, particularly in public secondary school contexts (Mesra et al., 2021; Sebullen et al., 2023). This gap reinforces the need for a phenomenological focus that centers how working students actively construct aspiration within lived constraint.

Limitations

The study is limited by its small purposive sample and single-school context. Accounts are self-reported and may reflect individual interpretation. Nonetheless, the phenomenological approach provides depth of understanding and offers practical insights for schools serving learners in similar rural, livelihood-dependent settings.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the lived experiences of high school working students at Datu Lipus Makapandong National High School are shaped by the constant negotiation between schooling and labor. Their engagement in work is primarily driven by poverty, family responsibility, and the need to support basic personal, school, and household expenses. While work allows them to contribute to their families and develop self-reliance, financial responsibility, and maturity, it also creates academic and emotional difficulties, including fatigue, absences, delayed outputs, reduced study time, worry, and exhaustion. These experiences reveal that working students demonstrate resilience and strong aspirations, but their perseverance should not be romanticized, as it develops within conditions of hardship, limited resources, and competing responsibilities. Thus, their academic struggles should be understood not as lack of motivation, but as part of the broader realities of poverty, labor, and survival.

REFERENCES

1) Alarilla, R. M. L., and Kintanar, G. N. 2024. Inspiring journeys of resilience and success of working students: Real life stories of overcoming obstacles. Southeast Asian Journal of International Peer Reviewed Journal Multidisciplinary Studies, 4(1), 1–16. https://research.cmc.edu.ph/index.php/journals/article/view/146
2) Almarzouki, A. F., Alghamdi, R. A., Alzahrani, S. H., and Alghamdi, A. A. 2022. The impact of sleep and mental health on working memory and academic performance. PLOS ONE, 17(11), e0276832. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276832

3) Aton, J. G. B., Acenas, J. M. S., and Ocampo, M. A. J. 2024. Opportunities and challenges of working students in blended learning. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation, 5(1), 756–762. https://www.allmultidisciplinaryjournal.com/uploads/archives/20240711205029_A-24-170.1.pdf
4) Autida, M. R. 2023. Working while studying: The academic experiences of working students in the Philippines. International Journal of Research Publications, 127(1), 1–12.
5) Bishop, N. J., Wang, K., and Daggy, J. K. 2020. Neighborhoods and health during the transition to adulthood: A scoping review. Health & Place, 63, 102336. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2020.102336
6) Burnette, J. L., Knouse, L. E., Vavra, D. T., O'Boyle, E. H., and Brooks, M. A. 2023. Growth mindset interventions: A meta-analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 149(3–4), 174–205. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000368
7) Byun, S.-y., Meece, J. L., and Irvin, M. J. 2021. Rural-nonrural disparities in postsecondary educational attainment revisited. American Educational Research Journal, 58(4), 731–768.
8) Cherry, K. 2024. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Verywell Mind. https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4136760
9) Di Pietro, G. 2023. The impact of COVID-19 on student achievement: Evidence from a recent meta-analysis. Educational Research Review, 39, 100530. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100530
10) Fontanilla, J. L. 2022. Working while studying: The lived experiences of Filipino working students. International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis, 5(8), 1–10.
11) Galleto, P. G. 2022. Working students: Their benefits, challenges and coping mechanisms. International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 11(6), 1–12.
12) Grozev, V. H., and Easterbrook, M. J. 2024. Can social identities improve working students' academic and social outcomes? Lessons from three studies. Education Sciences, 14(9), 939. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14090939
13) Habib, R. R., El-Haddad, N. W., Elzein, K., and Hojeij, S. 2020. Mental and self-rated health of bakery workers in Lebanon: A national study. SAGE Open Medicine, 8. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312120962345
14) Hopper, E. 2020. Role strain: Definition, theory, and examples. ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/role-strain-4777758
15.) International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund. 2025. Child labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/2024%20Global%20Estimates%20of%20Child%20Labour%20Report.pdf
16.) Issahaku, J., Nkyi, I., and Dramanu, B. 2020. Impact of work life balance on the psychological wellbeing of employees in the University of Cape Coast. Journal of Psychology & Behavioral Science, 8(1), 8–19.
17) Kerr, E., and Cabral, A. 2023. The pros and cons of working while in college. U.S. News & World Report. https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/weighing-the-pros-and-cons-of-working-while-in-college
18.) Kroupová, Z., Havránek, T., and Irsová, Z. 2024. Student employment and education: A meta-analysis. Economics of Education Review, 100, 102539. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2024.102539
19) LaMorte, W. W. 2022. The social cognitive theory. Boston University School of Public Health. https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/sb/behavioralchangetheories/behavioralchangetheories5.html
20) Lazarus, R. S., and Folkman, S. 1984. Stress, appraisal, and coping. Springer.
21) Lee, J., Jeong, H. J., and Kim, S. 2021. Stress, anxiety, and depression among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and their use of mental health services. Innovative Higher Education, 46, 519–538. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09552-y
22) Li, Y., Wang, A., Wu, Y., Han, N., and Huang, H. 2021. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of college students: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 669119. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.669119
23) Mai, Y., Wu, Y. J., and Huang, Y. 2021. What type of social support is important for student resilience during COVID-19? A latent profile analysis. Frontiers in Psychology, 12, 646145. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.646145
24) Maliao, R. J., Pomeroy, R. S., and Turingan, R. G. 2023. Well-being of artisanal fishing communities and children's engagement in fisheries amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: A case in Aklan, Philippines. Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 10, 287. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01716-9
25) McLeod, S. 2024. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Simply Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html
26) Mesra, R., Hasrin, A., Fathimah, S., Rahman, R., and Sidik, S. P. 2021. The phenomenon of student life while studying and working. Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 603, 318–321. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211130.058
27) Mukhtar, S. 2020. Pakistanis' mental health during the COVID-19. Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 51, 102127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102127

28) Nickerson, C. 2023. Role strain theory: Definition and examples. Simply Sociology. https://simplysociology.com/role-strain.html
29) Nickerson, C. 2024. Social cognitive theory. Simply Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-cognitive-theory.html
30) Perna, L. W., and Odle, T. K. 2020. Recognizing the reality of working college students. Academe, 106(1). https://www.aaup.org/article/recognizing-reality-working-college-students
31) Philippine Statistics Authority. 2023. Special release on working children 2020–2022. https://batangmalaya.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Special-Release-on-Working-Children-2020-2022.pdf
32.) Race, R., Medina, M., and Reyes, M. 2020. High school working students: A phenomenological study with photovoice. International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, 10(5), 1–10.
33) Randhawa, A. K., and Vella-Brodrick, D. A. 2025. Online self-compassion interventions and wellbeing outcomes: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. Mindfulness. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-025-02606-8
34) Reeve, J., and Cheon, S. H. 2021. Autonomy-supportive teaching: Its malleability, benefits, and potential to improve educational practice. Educational Psychologist, 56(1), 54–77.
35) Remenick, L., and Bergman, M. 2021. Support for working students: Considerations for higher education institutions. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 69(1), 34–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2020.1777381
36) Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L. 2020. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 61, 101860. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860
37) Sebullen, C. J., Balquin, A. B., and Acosta, R. P. 2023. Experiences of working while studying: A phenomenological study of Baguio Central University college students. International Journal of Research Publications, 127(1), 1–12.
38) Summer, R., McCoy, M., Trujillo, I., and Rodriguez, E. 2025. Support for working students: Understanding the impacts of employment on students' lives. Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 26(4), 1123–1146. https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251221149209
39) Suud, F. M., Agilkaya-Sahin, Z., Na'imah, T., Azhar, M., and Kibtiyah, M. 2024. The impact of family social support on academic resilience in Indonesian and Turkish students: The mediating role of self-regulated learning. International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 29(1), 2361725. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2361725
40) Tan, J. S., and Lee, K. H. 2021. Social support and academic resilience among students: A qualitative inquiry. Journal of Educational and Social Research, 11(5), 120–130.
41) Tumin, T., Faizuddin, A., Mansir, F., Purnomo, H., and Aisyah, N. 2020. Working students in higher education: Challenges and solutions. Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education, 4(1), 79–89.
42) Tus, J., Rayo, F., Lubo, R., and Cruz, M. A. 2022. The struggles of working students in the new normal: Basis for intervention program. International Journal of Psychology and Counseling, 12(1), 1–12.
43) Verulava, T., and Jorbenadze, R. 2022. The impact of part-time employment on students' health and academic performance. Malta Medical Journal, 34(2), 44–53.
44) Warshawski, S. 2022. Academic self-efficacy, resilience and social support among first-year Israeli nursing students learning in online environments during COVID-19 pandemic. Nurse Education Today, 110, 105267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2022.105267
45) Wojciechowska, M. 2020. Employment of students and its impact on academic performance and professional development. Journal of Education Culture and Society, 11(2), 269–280.
46) Xu, Z., Wijekumar, K., Ramirez, G., Hu, X., and Irey, R. 2023. The effectiveness of self-regulated learning interventions on academic achievement: A meta-analysis. Educational Psychology Review, 35, 18.

There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.