

## Overcoming Barriers and Finding Strengths: The Lives of College Students as Single Mothers

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Vol.5, Issue 1 | January 2022

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### KEYWORDS

single mother-students,  
single mother, overcoming  
barriers, finding strengths,  
theme analysis.

### ABSTRACT

Single parenting among teenage students in undergraduate school faces a variety of challenges in both a parent and a student responsibility and even dream of becoming a successful woman someday to sustain the basic needs of their children. The design of this study consists of twelve (12) interview questions with student single mothers who were currently enrolled in Mindanao State University, Marawi City. During the pilot interview, seven (7) questions were adopted from the study of Ajandi (2011) until the researchers came up with twelve (12) interview questions due to the follow-up questions being made and observed during the pilot-testing interview. The selected five single mother students were from the three colleges in the University, two from the College of Education, another two from the College of Business Administration, and one from the College of Engineering. The data offer an insight into the challenges faced by young women and the insights on how they passed those challenges or barriers of becoming a student and single parent at the same time. The narratives also serve as an exploration framework for the strengths and weaknesses and the factors that most influenced their ability to continue their studies. Through a thematic analysis, the study found that these single mothers are more motivated to continue their studies to support their children in the future. They also revealed that no matter how many hardships they face, these single mothers become tougher when they think of their children. A love of a mother to her children motivated them to strive harder. The study shows that further investigation into family dynamics is needed regarding the nurturing the success of a teen mother.

### Introduction

Playing a role of two at two desirable times is critical being a student and at the same time a mother. These

two are not an easy task to handle, especially when you have difficulty balancing the load between your studies and of your child's needs and attention, particularly on financial, moral, and emotional needs. Most single mothers who are still studying are still dependent on their parents for shelter and care in making things; and their children as motivation and reason in continuing their study to become a mother who can give and support the needs of her children. The act or process of raising children is defined as parenting (Staff, 2004). Single parenting, on the other hand, is the same, yet with only one parent raising her child or children. Single parents can be classified into two categories: (1) solo parents-by decision, resulting in divorce; legal separation; mutual decision to separate, with or without legal agreement; being abandoned or left by a spouse; and decision to leave spouse ; (2) Parents who have a child but do not want to marry; adopt your own child or go to an adoption service; and chose to raise a relative's child or children (Gault, et al., 2014).

Keeping children while working and earning a postsecondary degree is difficult for any family; however, single student parents face additional obstacles as they try to finish their degrees as soon as possible. Since financial, academic, and social supports are structured for traditional students, single student parents are forced to fit into the mold of a traditional college student, usually a student without dependents (Cerven, 2013). Higher education institutions might develop strategies and services to help single student parents achieve more equal results in terms of persistence and completion if they better recognized the obstacles they face (Fenster, 2004; Mason, 2002; Yakaboski, 2010).

A significant amount of research in the United States underlines the value of single mothers pursuing a 2-year or 4-year degree in hopes of improving their earning capacity and thereby step out of poverty (Adair, 2001; Center for Women Policy Studies, 2002; Haleman, 2004; Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Kahn & Polakow, 2004). However, very little research qualitatively explores the experiences of single parents. According to Adair (2001), education is vital for all citizens; it is especially important for those who will continue to experience racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, as well as those who have been marginalized and excluded from mainstream American culture.

Meanwhile, the number of single mothers in the Philippines as decades had passed to rise as society grows and continues to change through time. Solo-parent families are now distinguished in society and

have now become a vital subculture that will have to be accepted in the society as a valid and legitimate unit (Ortigas, 1996: 12). Considering that these single parents/mothers are still part of the society who needed most the guidance and support from the government and with the people surrounding them and of whatever reasons, they became one (single parent) that needs to be heard as well. The challenges faced by these women and the courage and strength required to meet these challenges cannot be underestimated.

Several studies (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Mason, 2002; Snow, 2005) have shown that single mother students are working on the time, finances, and energy levels that often result in significant personal needs being sacrificed. The researchers have mentioned all this to understand how these women face the various challenges they face in society and have decided to study the lives and experiences of single mother students in schools.

## **Research Problem**

This study aims to explore the experiences of college students as single mothers. Questions such as how they overcome the challenges as students in the university; and what experiences do they have as single mothers and students at the same time were considered in this study.

## **Methodology**

### *Study Design*

The researchers used a qualitative type of research design which is relevant to know the participant's perspectives and insights on how to overcome the barriers faced by single mother students and the sources of their strengths. The study was designed with 12 (twelve) structured interview questions, which were answered by the participants. This research design is believed to be appropriate in getting the significant information needed in the study.

The researchers chose only five (5) MSU single-mother college students enrolled during the 2015-2016 school year. These five were purposefully chosen based on two criteria: (1) single-mother college students currently enrolled in the University; and (2) who are willing to be interviewed because the researchers gathered personal opinions of the respondents. The researchers believed that the five respondents could provide the necessary information for the study.

*Procedure*

To provide answers to the research problems, the researchers used an interview guide and posed questions. The interview guide included twelve (12) questions divided into two (2) sessions. The participant's personal information, such as age, course, year level, and children, is included in the first part. The second part consisted of twelve (12) key questions that were answered by the participants' viewpoints and observations on single parenting and student life.

During the pilot-test interview, seven (7) questions were adopted from the study of Ajandi (2011) as follows: (1) what was the reason you chose to apply to university? (2) what or who has helped you balance your role as single mothers and students? (3) what has been difficult for you? (4) what has been positive for you? (5) do you experience discrimination from your peers, instructors, or administrators, in the classroom? For example, based on race and ethnicity, ability, age, sex, family status, sexuality, or class? (6) are there any supports on campus or in the community that you find helpful? does any individual support such as friends or parents? (7) what are the advantages of being a single mother? what are the difficulties?

After the pilot-testing interview, the researchers come up with twelve (12) structured interview questions after the follow-up questions being made and observed.

The following questions were raised during the interview:

1. What was the reason you chose to apply to this university?
2. Did it ever come into your mind to quit school because of your situation?
3. What or who has helped you balance your role as a single student mother?
4. Did you attend a part-time job to help or lessen the financial needs of your child and your studies? If yes, why?
5. What has been difficult for you as a single parent and a student at the same time?
6. At first, did you feel socially unaccepted?

7. What has been positive for you?
8. Do you experience discrimination from your peers, instructors, or administrators in the classroom?
9. Is there any support on campus or in the community that you find helpful? Is there any individual support such as friends or family?
10. What are the advantages of being a single mother?
11. What are the disadvantages?
12. How did you manage the stress you are feeling?

The researchers exploited resources in books, articles, and graduate theses concerning the topic. The researchers also took advantage of the Internet as a prolific source of the data that entwined facts about students who are also a single mother overcomes the barriers and how they find strengths of playing the two critical roles; as a student; and as a mother. The researchers conducted a pilot test interview to validate the reliability of the interview questions. The pilot interview assisted the researchers in determining if there are flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview design and allow the researchers to make necessary revisions before the implementation of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2007). In the duration of the interview, some follow-up questions were asked to fully get the information the researchers need to know.

During the interview, the facial expressions of the participants were observed to determine whether the participants are sincere and serious in answering the questions (Creswell, 2005). Data gathering was done through one-on-one interviews with the participant. Informed consent and willingness of the participants were primarily satisfied before the start of the interviews. The interviews were more like having long chats with friends – informal, open-ended and without special structure (Azimi, 2012).

**Findings and Discussion**

**I. Participant's Profile**

**Table 1**  
*Participant's Profile in terms of age, number of children, course and year level*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Age	20	22	23	20	28
Course	BS Accountancy	BSED T.L.E	Civil Engineering	BSBA Marketing	BSED History
Year Level	5 <sup>th</sup> Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	4 <sup>th</sup> Year
No. of Children	1	1	1	1	4

Table 1 shows the age of the participants ranges from 20 to 28 years old. As can be seen, respondents have one (1) to four (4) children, four (4) of which are separated by choice, and the other one (1) is divorced due to some circumstances. Participants were coming from the three colleges of the university; Business Administration major in Marketing and Accountancy; College of Engineering major in Civil Engineering; and from the College of Education major in TLE and History. Three out of five participants were graduating students in 2016, and the other remaining two are third-year students.

## II. Participants' insights on single parenting and being a student at the same time

2.1 What was your reason for choosing to apply to this university?

### Theme: The Value of Education

All of the interviews shared the belief that a college education will lead to a better life, a more satisfying career, and a higher level of respect from other people and that education will increase a person's self-esteem along with her growth as a person. According to Duncan (2011, p.2), more and more people recognize education as the game-changer in the global economy. Economic development, creativity, productivity, and job creation are all fueled by a world-class education system. Participants, for example, stated that it is necessary to choose a school with such a high educational standard when completing a degree to be easily hired. Mindanao State University was selected by all these participants because of its strong belief, as mentioned above. In addition to being one of Mindanao's top universities, one student (1) stated that the university had also been selected because it offered students with low school fees.

2.2 Did it come into your mind to quit school because you are pregnant? Yes or No and why?

### Theme: Quitting means Failure

Teen mothers are negatively impacted by schooling, mothering, peer pressure, and education. According to Kaufman et al. (2001), the primary reasons for girls dropping out of school are pregnancy and parenting. According to Theron and Dunn (2006), the adolescent child-bearing process of girls is particularly disturbing, and as a result, many teenage mothers drop out and never return. Throughout the

interviews, all participants expressed a desire to continue their studies despite their current circumstances. They are even more motivated to continue their studies so to support their child in the future. It has also been stated that children were a motivator for single mothers to enroll in post-secondary education in the first place (Haleman, 2004). As a result, single mothers' educational pursuits can help their children by lowering risk factors associated with poverty. For them, quitting at some point is not a failing factor in achieving the goals they set for themselves when they enrolled in university. It is clear from the responses of the participants that their goal is to graduate despite the pressures of both parenting and studying.

2.3 Who has helped you balance your role as a single mother and as a student?

### Theme: External Support

Bruns (2004) also found in his study that having a support group on campus for single mothers could express their worries and anxiety about their experiences on and off the campus. Each participant mentioned that they find support from other people, from financial support to emotional support. Words of encouragement, advice from friends and family, and brief discussions with peers are examples of emotional support. On the other hand, financial assistance includes a friend's initiative to give any amount for her additional school expenses and day-to-day food consumption. Four (4) out of five (5) participants say their parents are their main source of help in balancing their roles as a parent and as a student, while participant four (4) concluded that in her course, her parents and the parents of her child's father never supported her in her journey, even though she bravely raised her child alone with the help of friends and other people unrelated to her. Whatever the consequences or the situation of these respondents, it is a good thing to know that they do not feel alone in times of needing someone to talk to or a companion. For instance, participant one (1) asserts that these single-mother students need someone to accompany and to talk with, especially with their case. Support, on the other hand, is not just financial aids from loved ones. A simple conversation from a friend and a family member has a great impact to consider for these single mother-students, especially, they came from places miles away from the university.

2.4 Did you attend a part-time job/s to lessen the financial needs of your child and your studies?

If yes, explain.

### **Theme: Working for a Cost**

According to Mason (2002), information gleaned from a quantitative study on the top list of barriers in higher education is money. That is why most of the participants in this study have part-time jobs to help their parents lessened their financial load while studying and other expenses needed by their children. Four (4) out of five (5) participants have part-time jobs to help their studies financially. In terms of rearing their children, these single mother-students are still dependent on their parents. Furthermore, Chevalier and Viitanen (2003) argue that teenage motherhood appears to have lengthy implications for young mothers' career development, and thus is probable to result in poverty transmission from generation after generation. As it has been said by participant two (2), despite the mistakes they have made they can also be responsible in some ways with or without the dictate of their family. They will surely look for financial sources to help them, to lighten the situation they had brought to the family. With their responses, these single mothers do not count the idea of transmitting poverty. Hence success is their main goal in the university.

2.5 At first, did you feel socially unaccepted? If yes, why?

### **Theme: Socially Accepted**

In most cases, if we will be foreseeing someone to be a single mother, many would think that she is not a good woman, and maybe others will even throw negative feedback on them. However, as time goes by, cases like these were gradually and partially accepted by society. Since single parenting is somewhat a rampant scenario already in some parts of the community, which is why the five respondents of the study said that they do not feel socially unaccepted by their peers and by most of the people around them. In the Transcript, participant two (2) stated that even the doing is rampant already in society, parents, especially, could not resist seeing their children being in a problematic situation without extending parental help to them. A parent's love and concern for their daughter will always weigh the heavier. Participant two (2) also added that it is normal for parents to be angry when their daughter got pregnant at a young age. However, according to Mullaly (2002), oppression must be a fundamental concern for all those concerned with creating an appropriate definition of social justice and for those committed to social justice in practice (p. 35). Mental health has a significant

impact on a person's desire to strive in life. Acceptance in society should not be denied to them, particularly considering the pressures of schooling and child-rearing.

2.6 What has been positive for you (as a single parent)?

### **Theme: Mother as a Role Model**

Each of the participants spoke lovingly of their motivation to continue their study, focusing on the thoughts that someday they would be able to provide all the love and needs of their child. What happened to them is an experience not to be followed since being in their situation as a single mother is not an easy task. Moreover, part of it includes teaching them to learn right from wrong, to be kind, a sense of morality, values, and social responsibility.

2.7 Did you experience discrimination from your peers, instructors, or administrators in the classroom?

### **Theme: Positive Criticisms**

Criticisms lingered anywhere when one sees someone has made a mistake, and negative feedbacks are expected as always and can never be denied in the norms of society. According to the theory of Miller (1967), Force Field Analysis Theory explains how adult learners used positive forces in their lives to decrease the negative forces that threaten to lead to failure. Participants even see their situation as a positive factor; what matters most to them is that they did not step into someone's shoes and that they are trying to prove that despite their situation, someday, others will not see them as a burden or failure but rather a successful woman. Kaufman et al. (2001) asserted that support in education is a steady cause of stress for teenage women, many of which fall behind due to bullying by their peers and educators.

Among the five (5) participants, participant one (1) is the most likely to have experienced a short period of discrimination in the eyes of one of her department teaching staff. In a broad sense, she shows that her situation will not deter her from getting a good grade. With this positive and courageous approach to embracing the predicament, she can eradicate those criticisms of her situation. Criticisms could either be taken positively and negatively, as participant one (1) had said if it had

done nothing good to you, better neglect it. Participants in this study demonstrated from the start of the interview how positive they are in overcoming these barriers of criticism, as evidenced by their facial expressions on how their child motivates them more than being affected by societal criticisms.

2.8 Are there any support from the campus or from the community that you find helpful? Is there any individual support such as a friend or parent?

### **Theme: Family and Friends**

Our parents may seem far distant from us, but they did not fail to show us and to let us feel how much they cared for us, especially in the cases of these five single mothers who are being supported by their parents from a far distant wherein parents who continuously supporting their children financially and morally despite the distance from their children. Friends may not help them financially, but encouragement and other motivating factors rendered by their friends, help them lessen the load they are carrying. As it has been said in the transcript below, participant one (1) said that "support" does not only mean financial help, but also, words of wisdom and encouragement from parents, peers, and other groups of individuals in the community, which are of big help to anybody.

2.9 What are the advantages of being a single student-mother?

### **Theme: Positive life despite what happened**

The majority of the participants have said that they are still happy despite the situation and that they try to strive harder for a better future through education, that they gain joy, strength, and the hope of attaining a good standard of living in the future. Despite those challenging issues faced by these single student-mothers, there are still significant advantages it brought to their lives. Many single parents are going to college for a specific purpose, as opposed to some traditional students who attend college because it is the pathway their parents and peers suggest. Stone, Nelson and Nieman (1994) study participants stated that their kids were very important to their academic success and they were studying at universities to offer their kids chances they did not have while they grew up. Similar to the ideas as shared by the participants of this study that their children are the top motivating factor to their success why they choose to enroll in this university.

The participants were very positive, especially participant one (1), who stated that even though she has a child at a young age, she can still manage to continue doing what she had dreamed and planned before having a baby. One of the benefits of becoming a single parent, according to participant five (5), is courage. Because of her children, her courage drives her to continue her life's pursuits.

2.10 What are the disadvantages?

### **Theme: Increased Challenges in Attaining a Degree**

They have nothing else to rely on, single mothers must juggle responsibilities and duties, especially when it comes to child-rearing and school responsibilities. The study's five (5) participants all see their situation as positive forces in their lives. Despite juggling duties and responsibilities, they remain happy and faithful to God to strengthen them every day as they move forward in their lives. Four (4) out of every five (5) participants say it's still different if you have someone to balance the duties and responsibilities of child-rearing. Someone with whom they can discuss their plans for the child and whom the child can identify as a father figure. Another disadvantage, as mentioned by participant four (4), was the freedom to go out with peers and the time to beautify herself, both of which most other teenagers can enjoy in their lives. Despite all of the things she has been denied the opportunity to enjoy, participant four (4) concludes that having her baby with her is worthwhile and fulfilling.

2.11 What are the difficulties?

### **Theme: Financial Burden**

The first issue for most single mothers or parents is financial assistance. Some parents who can easily provide their daughter with the financial support she requires embrace it and even encourage their daughters to continue their education. As a result, some single mother students can easily overcome or cope with their financial difficulties. Even their social life runs smoothly because most of the participants are socially and financially supported by their parents. Some people limit their actions as part of their social life to reduce the amount of feedback they receive from others. According to the transcript of participant three (3), even though money is the most significant barrier to higher education, especially for single mother students, emotional pain is the most damaging barrier that a woman may face.

Participant five (5) mentioned time management as one of the challenges she has faced, especially when school and child-rearing are part of her life. According to participant five (5), if time management is not properly managed, it can lead to stress. Aside from financial issues, participant one (1) stated that nursing a child has been difficult for her as a first-time mother. A similar sentiment was expressed in the USA, where the argument arose that it is not easy for teen mothers to care for a child and to give adequate time for schoolwork (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; McLanahan & Sandefur, 2009; Eccles & Harold, 1993).

2.12 How did you manage or makes lessen the stress you are feeling?

### Theme: Faith in Higher Being

Believing and praying unto God may somehow lessen the burden, and the stress one is feeling. Just like the respondents of this study, wherein they reveal that regardless of what happened and of whatever consequences and criticisms they are getting, still, prayers remained in their everyday lives. As they had said "prayer can move mountains" and it is echoed by participant two (2), that in every stressful day, there is only one person who never fails to listen and understand a man's whims even in the worst situation in life and that is God. The participants consider their faith in the higher being as one who can be their refuge in anything they do and in whatever experiences that life may offers.

### Conclusion

According to the data presented in Chapter four (4), being a single mother and a student is not an easy task with juggling responsibilities. Most participants have financial, social, and emotional issues, but they do not talk about them because they prefer to ignore negative forces that might discourage them because of their situation. Most of the participants have a strong personality and are optimistic about their future. The pessimistic approach to viewing negative forces in life will not help a person, as explained in the Field of Theory. Negative encounters should be neglected if they bring no advantage to you and should be viewed favorably to achieve all your goals in life.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following are hereby recommended by the researchers:

1. For the single mother students to continue their studies and remain confident that, despite the hurdles they had been facing, there is always a way to achieve their objective of succeeding and that completed their education is subject to one-way tickets to success.
2. For these single mother-students to ensure that they continue to fight with or without discrimination between peers and other groups.
3. For the parents to continually support, if possibly not abandon their daughter, especially, on this very delicate situation.
4. For future researchers to include the parents and the father of the children of individual mother students in their perceptions.

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