



Real-life Struggles: Exploring the Experiences of Graduating Working Students in Senior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges faced by graduating senior high school students in the Philippines who balance employment and education amid the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions. The study aims to explore the obstacles these students encounter, focusing on their ability to manage work and academic responsibilities. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, the study conducted semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with three students from Tanza National Comprehensive High School. Informed consent was secured, and interviews were recorded and analyzed through a conventional content analysis to identify recurring themes. The analysis revealed that these students navigate a complex landscape of challenges, primarily centered on the struggle to balance work and study, financial pressures, and the crucial role of family support, while also developing resilience and practical skills. Students reported experiences of stress, time management difficulties, and pressure, yet highlighted the importance of encouragement from family and peers. The findings emphasize the necessity of robust family structures, socio-economic advancements, and improved educational policies to support working students. This study concludes that targeted institutional and policy interventions are essential to mitigate the unique burdens on working students and to harness their potential for academic and personal success. This study underscores the complex challenges these students face and advocates for enhanced support mechanisms to help them navigate their dual responsibilities effectively during unprecedented times.

RESUME

Este estudo examina os desafios enfrentados por estudantes filipinos do último ano do ensino médio que equilibram emprego e educação em meio às interrupções causadas pela pandemia de COVID-19. A pesquisa tem como objetivo explorar os obstáculos que esses estudantes enfrentam, com foco em sua capacidade de gerenciar responsabilidades de trabalho e acadêmicas. Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa de narrativa, o estudo conduziu entrevistas semiestruturadas e individuais com três alunos da Tanza National Comprehensive High School. O consentimento informado foi obtido, e as entrevistas foram gravadas e analisadas por meio de uma análise de conteúdo convencional para identificar temas recorrentes. A análise revelou que esses alunos navegam por um panorama complexo de desafios, centrados principalmente na luta para equilibrar trabalho e estudo, nas pressões financeiras e no papel crucial do apoio familiar, ao mesmo tempo em que desenvolvem resiliência e habilidades práticas. Os estudantes relataram experiências de estresse, dificuldades de gerenciamento do tempo e pressão, mas destacaram a importância do incentivo da família e dos colegas. Os achados enfatizam a necessidade de estruturas familiares sólidas, avanços socioeconômicos e políticas educacionais aprimoradas para apoiar os estudantes trabalhadores. Este estudo conclui que intervenções institucionais e políticas direcionadas são essenciais para mitigar os fardos únicos sobre os estudantes trabalhadores e aproveitar seu potencial para o sucesso acadêmico e pessoal. Esta pesquisa ressalta os desafios complexos que esses estudantes enfrentam e defende mecanismos de apoio aprimorados para ajudá-los a navegar por suas duplas responsabilidades de forma eficaz durante tempos sem precedentes.

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Introduction

The current school year (2022–2023) opened a new chapter in the lives of students, teachers, and parents. To help the students pursue their dreams and aspirations. Teachers should continue providing quality teaching and learning while building minds and shaping dreams. And to the parents to guide their children to become better individuals and support the educational institution. Following prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns and the adoption of distance learning by the Department of Education (DepEd), as advised by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), the pandemic has had widespread impacts on individuals and significantly disrupted the provision of education, particularly in comparison to pre-pandemic norms.

In the final quarter of 2022, the University of San Carlos (USC) and Thames International School (TSI) conducted the inaugural Philippine Assessment for Learning Loss Solutions (PALLS), which identified learning gaps in science and mathematics that were linked to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ombay, G., 2023). Aside from learning loss, many Filipinos, especially students enrolled in the public school system, experienced and were pushed into poverty due to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted education delivery but also exacerbated learning loss among students, as highlighted by Kuhfeld and Tarasawa (2020), who emphasize that school closures can result in significant academic setbacks comparable to summer learning loss. This situation compounds the challenges faced by students balancing work and study, particularly those from low-income families.

Following the effects of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), poverty has been specifically highlighted as a vulnerability, with anticipated income reductions arising from decreased economic activity (Albert et al., 2020). Thus, it is no longer a surprise that many in a household will find the means to survive and generate income despite the adverse effects of the pandemic. Due to this aftermath, some students, especially those belonging to the lower-income class and below the poverty line, opted to have full-time or part-time jobs during the implementation of distance learning and continue to work while studying as the schools opened for face-to-face classes. Attending classes could become challenging because students have to spend on transportation and other school expenses. Although public education is free in K-12, it is undeniable that students must incur some costs to pursue their studies. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic extended beyond education, affecting families' financial stability and increasing the vulnerability of students who had to work to support themselves and their households (Albert et al., 2020; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020).

According to Mutya et al. (2022), students faced significant difficulties and hardships in their academic pursuits during the pandemic. Among working students, balancing work and studies proved particularly challenging. The study highlighted that many students juggled

employment alongside their education to address financial and social needs, as well as to support their academic goals. Despite originating from low-income backgrounds, these students maintained their work and studies amid uncertain circumstances. Furthermore, the research underscored the importance of achieving a balanced lifestyle for working students.

Pregoner et al. (2020) identified financial aid, personal growth, and intrinsic motivation as key drivers for students who choose to work while pursuing university studies. Watanabe (2005) highlighted that as more students take on employment, they must balance their academic responsibilities, extracurricular activities, and work obligations to maintain their desired lifestyles. The study also suggests that the students have a positive attitude and solid time management skills. It also revealed that students overcome challenges (working while studying) due to good time management and self-reflection.

Romano and Abadiano (2021) identified that financial obligations, challenging circumstances, and motivations to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience significantly influence students' decisions to work while pursuing their studies. The research indicated that respondents faced physical and mental health challenges, stress, and distractions as they balanced their work and academic commitments. Strategies to address these challenges include maintaining equilibrium among work, study, and personal life, fostering a positive mindset, seeking spiritual support, and developing self-reliance. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted that traits such as effective time management, perseverance, determination, prioritization, and a sense of responsibility are crucial for working students aiming to succeed. Another study found that financial independence is the primary reason for students to work while studying, while experience gained from working is a significant benefit. However, students encounter exhaustion and stress more frequently than those who do not work (Chantrea et al., 2017).

In the study by Tumin et al. (2020) on working students at the International Islamic University Malaysia, the respondents clearly understood the necessity of balancing work and academic responsibilities. They perceived this balance as essential for securing financial support and fostering personal development. Additionally, the respondents identified several inherent challenges, including the need for effective time management and the maintenance of academic focus. Nevertheless, they regarded working during their studies as a motivating factor for personal growth and acquiring skills necessary for securing better employment opportunities.

Burgos et al. (2020) studied the difficulties experienced by Filipino students who work, recognizing work-related, academic, financial, and personal adversities as critical obstacles. The challenges associated with part-time employment mirror the multiple hurdles students face in balancing work and study. While some students pursue part-time jobs to gain early professional experience, refine specific competencies, and generate income, they often confront unavoidable challenges in their positions. Despite these challenges, many students

benefited from the dual responsibilities of being both students and employees in numerous ways.

The study of Regis (2019) has highlighted the various challenges experienced by working students, such as insufficient sleep, the pressure to excel, maintaining a healthy work-life balance, the potential for injury and health risks, academic performance concerns, difficulties in building interpersonal relationships, financial constraints, and the significance of spending meaningful time with family. Family and peer support became vital in navigating remote learning and work-study balance during the pandemic, as parents and peers provided emotional and practical assistance (Garbe et al., 2020).

Mental health challenges emerged as a critical concern during this period, with students experiencing heightened stress and anxiety due to academic pressures and pandemic-related uncertainties (Son et al., 2020). A study conducted among students at Iloilo Science and Technology University, Miagao Campus in Iloilo, Philippines, found that financial challenges were the main driving force behind students taking on on-campus employment. The respondents reported experiencing a range of emotions, including happiness, sadness, frustration, and anxiety. Despite work pressures, these students demonstrated practical time management skills for balancing their studies and jobs and high self-esteem and academic achievement (Frigillano et al., 2015).

The existing literature indicates that students in the Philippines and other countries often engage in work while studying to address their financial and social requirements. Nonetheless, they encounter challenges such as time management, health concerns, fatigue, and stress. To successfully navigate and surmount these challenges, one can employ several key approaches, such as prudent time allocation, introspective analysis, maintaining equilibrium among work, study, and personal life, cultivating a positive mindset, pursuing spiritual counsel, and developing self-reliance. Financial independence and gaining experience are the main reasons for working while studying. Despite exhaustion and stress, many students continue to work because they see it as a motivator for personal growth and skill development. Research focuses on high school and undergraduate students, but there is a gap in understanding how graduating working students handle these challenges.

This study explores how students develop skills, overcome struggles, and achieve their goals while balancing work and study commitments, including personal development and essential life skills. Consequently, this research seeks to answer the following: (1) To know the challenges experienced by working students and their manner of dealing with the challenges they experienced, (2) To see the need to balance work and study at the same time, and (3) To know the manner they resolve and handle the challenges of working while studying.

Relative to this, Social Exchange Theory suggests that social relationships involve the exchange of resources, where individuals assess the costs and benefits to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. In the context of students working while studying, Social Exchange

Theory can help explain how they manage their resources and seek support from their social networks.

This study is noteworthy due to its examination of the experiences of graduating working students in senior high school. It highlights their challenges in balancing school and work, explores support systems for their success, and considers the impact of identity factors on their academic and personal development. The findings can inform interventions, programs, and policies for supporting these students and promoting fairness and inclusion in education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed narrative inquiry as the qualitative design. Many qualitative researchers focus on authentically capturing people's lived experiences (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). Qualitative research gathers data about respondents' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Rather than answering questions about quantity or extent, it explores underlying reasons and processes (Tenny et al., 2022). A defining feature of qualitative research is its ability to present a narrative, frequently from the perspective of individuals directly involved. The 'dense' or 'rich' description, a distinguishing characteristic of qualitative research reporting, necessitates the inclusion of contextual details and respondent statements.

Narrative inquiry provides a plethora of opportunities for the development of such comprehensive descriptions, as it combines a sequence of events, frequently from the perspective of one or two individuals, to create a cohesive narrative. While focusing on a single individual may appear limiting, understanding the narratives of one or two individuals about a particular event or phenomenon can offer valuable insights into the factors that influenced those narratives. The divergence of contrasting narratives can also serve as opportunities for innovation (Tenny et al., 2022).

The researcher investigates the lives of individuals and solicits narratives from one or more respondents regarding their experiences. This method is known as narrative inquiry. Typically, the researcher arranges this information into a chronological narrative. Ultimately, the narrative establishes a shared account by integrating the perspectives of the researcher and the respondent (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In a narrative inquiry, interviews are typically used to collect respondents' personal stories and experiences, as well as their interpretations and meanings of those experiences. Narrative research emphasizes stories, and people are viewed as 'storied' individuals (Riessman, 2008). Unlike quantitative research methods, narrative approaches are more effective in capturing the contextual richness and depth inherent in individuals' lives (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Narrative interviews can also examine the broader social and cultural contexts in which individuals' experiences occur. In narrative inquiry, researchers must select one or more individuals to investigate—individuals who are accessible, willing to share information, notable for their accomplishments or ordinary character, or who offer a unique perspective on the phenomenon or issue under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that relies on narratives as the primary data source. As the narrators describe, this method has been applied across various fields to gain insights into culture, historical events, identity, and lifestyle.

The narrative technique uses human experience tales or narrative research to gather data. Narrative inquiry collects tales from people or small groups and typically includes the researcher since narratives attract the audience. Personal narratives often expose respondents' identity to researchers (Butina, 2015). The narrative inquiry research method stresses the value of personal tales and experiences in understanding societal issues. It analyzes and interprets narratives to understand how they form identities, beliefs, and social relationships.

Respondents and sampling technique

Three grade 12 graduating working students were purposively selected as respondents in the study, ensuring that they met the specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled as a Grade 12 graduating student at Tanza National Comprehensive High School, (2) engaged in part-time or full-time employment for at least three months prior to the study, and (3) willing to share their experiences through an interview.

Exclusion criteria included students who worked only during summer breaks or who had been in their job for less than three months. Narrative inquiry mainly employs purposive sampling procedures, whereby researchers concentrate on acquiring thorough and rich information from well-qualified individuals (Nigar, 2020; Palinkas, 2014). The recruitment process involved coordinating with the school's assistant principal, who helped identify potential respondents who met the criteria. The researcher then approached these students, provided a detailed information sheet about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, and scheduled a meeting to obtain written informed consent. These respondents were anonymized for confidentiality and identified only as Respondents 1 to 3. In accordance with institutional regulations, the assistant principal of Tanza National Comprehensive High School granted clearance prior to the commencement of the study.

Research instrument and Data collection procedure

The researchers utilized interviews to gather data, identifying patterns and themes and facilitating a deeper understanding of how these relate to respondents' characteristics and experiences. Interviews are a qualitative research method that involves posing open-ended

questions to elicit detailed and personal responses (Patton, 2015). This versatile and adaptable approach makes it suitable for exploring a broad spectrum of research questions and topics, ranging from individual experiences and viewpoints to social and cultural phenomena (Fontana & Frey, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021).

In particular, the researchers employed a semi-structured interview approach. This qualitative research method involves an open-ended conversation guided by a predetermined topic or theme (Mason, 2018). The researcher must set aside previous beliefs about reality to evaluate semi-structured interview questions and prompts (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). In narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews are utilized to collect data from respondents' personal stories, experiences, and viewpoints and analyze the meanings and themes inherent in those narratives. The benefits of employing semi-structured interviews in narrative inquiry include the capacity to gather comprehensive, detailed, and in-depth data that reflects the respondents' distinct perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, semi-structured interviews are adaptable and flexible, enabling the interviewer to delve deeper into particular areas of interest. Semi-structured interviews facilitate the establishment of rapport between the interviewer and respondent, resulting in more open and truthful responses (Patton, 2015).

However, there are also disadvantages to using a semi-structured interview in a narrative inquiry. One challenge is the potential for researcher bias, as the interviewer's own experiences and biases can influence the interpretation of the data (Mason, 2018). Additionally, the data obtained from semi-structured interviews may be challenging to analyze and interpret, as they often contain multiple themes and narratives that require careful attention to detail (Creswell, 2014). In conclusion, interviews are a valuable qualitative research technique for narrative inquiry designs, providing rich and detailed data that can be analyzed and interpreted in depth. Using a semi-structured interview in a narrative inquiry can provide valuable data that captures the unique experiences and perspectives of respondents.

Data Analysis

This study applied conventional content analysis, as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), to examine the collected data. The data analysis followed a stepwise process. First, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to gain a holistic understanding. Second, meaning units (significant statements or phrases) were identified and openly coded. Third, these codes were grouped into categories based on their relationships and similarities. Finally, overarching themes were developed from the categories that captured the core of the respondents' experiences.

This process was conducted manually without the use of qualitative analysis software. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing was employed, where a fellow researcher

reviewed the coding scheme and theme development to cross-check the analysis and minimize bias. Although it shares some characteristics with narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), the approach more closely corresponds to Clandinin's (2013) concept of "narrative as content analysis," rather than fulfilling the requirements for a full narrative inquiry study.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from respondents before the study, providing detailed information about the research purpose and their involvement. The consent process emphasized that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that all data would be anonymized. Special steps were implemented to safeguard the rights and welfare of graduating working students who may encounter distinct problems. Data collected was securely stored and accessible only to authorized personnel. The privacy and confidentiality of respondents were ensured during data analysis and reporting without bias or distortion. Respondents received a debriefing at the end of the study, explaining the research purpose, findings, and available support/resources. Ethical considerations were followed to safeguard the respondents' rights and welfare.

Results

This narrative inquiry, employing conventional content analysis, identified seven key themes encapsulating the real-life struggles and experiences of graduating working students in senior high school: Work-Study Balance, Personal Experiences, Family Support, Study Priorities, Work Demands, Peer Influence, and Financial Challenges. Each theme reflects the interplay of positive and negative experiences, supported by existing literature on the difficulties of time management (Mutya et al., 2022; Burgos et al., 2020), the mental health toll due to multiple stressors (Son et al., 2020), financial motivations for working while studying (Romano & Abadiano, 2021; Frigillano et al., 2015), the crucial role of family and peer support systems (Regis, 2019; Garbe et al., 2020), the strategic prioritization of education (Watanabe, 2005; Frigillano et al., 2015), and the dual nature of work as a source of both skill development and burden (Burgos et al., 2020; Chantrea et al., 2017).

Table 1

Challenges and Strategies in Balancing Employment and Academic Responsibilities

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Work-Study Balance	The central challenge of juggling dual responsibilities, leading to exhaustion, necessitating rigorous time management, and creating prioritization dilemmas.	"If you do not have time management, you do not have anything." (Respondent 3) "You need to weigh everything... if you can handle working and studying." (Respondent 1)

The theme of work-study balance encapsulates the challenges of managing dual responsibilities, including exhaustion, time management, and prioritization. Viewed through the lens of Social Exchange Theory, respondents constantly weighed the costs (time, exhaustion, academic pressure) against the benefits (financial independence, skill acquisition). Respondents articulated their motivations for working while studying, often driven by necessity or personal goals. For instance, Respondent 1 (male, 19) worked to purchase personal items, while Respondent 3 (female, 19) worked to support her siblings due to the absence of parental support. Respondent 2 (male, 18) cited the need to replace a stolen phone essential for schoolwork, highlighting situational triggers for employment.

Time management emerged as a critical challenge. Respondent 1 emphasized its importance, advising others to "weigh everything" before committing to work and study, a statement that directly reflects the cost-benefit analysis central to Social Exchange Theory. Respondent 3 stated, "If you do not have time management, you do not have anything," highlighting how effective self-management is the currency that makes the exchange between work and study sustainable. Exhaustion was a recurring issue, with Respondent 1 describing the strain of part-time work during peak customer demands and Respondent 3 struggling with afternoon work shifts followed by studying. To cope, respondents adopted strategies like drinking coffee (Respondent 2) or relying on support systems, such as Respondent 1's girlfriend and mother assisting with tasks, demonstrating how leveraging social resources can offset personal costs.

Prioritization dilemmas were evident. Respondent 3 considered abandoning work to focus on studies, feeling "behind on everything," a point where the costs threatened to outweigh the benefits. Respondent 2 stressed the inflexibility of both work and school schedules, requiring personal adjustments. Adverse effects included academic setbacks, as Respondent 1 dropped out temporarily due to prioritizing work for financial reasons, and Respondent 2 noted that earning money shifted his focus away from studying.

Despite these challenges, respondents reported minimal emotional or social difficulties, with Respondent 2 valuing work-related socialization and Respondent 1 viewing his dual role positively. This theme supports the findings of Mutya et al. (2022) and Burgos et al. (2020), which explicitly address the tension between work and study demands. The mental health toll of juggling work and study was evident, with fatigue and pressure frequently mentioned, aligning with Son et al.'s (2020) findings on increased anxiety and stress among students during the pandemic.

Table 2
Coping Mechanisms, Well-being, and Personal Aspirations

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Personal Experiences	Encompasses well-being, aspirations, and personal coping mechanisms, including reliance on social connections, discipline, and spiritual faith to navigate adversity.	"I always make sure that I have enough rest and sleep." (Respondent 1) "I always pray to God and surrender everything to Him." (Respondent 3)

Personal experiences encompassed respondents' well-being, aspirations, and coping mechanisms. Positive aspects included social connections, with Respondent 1 enjoying time with friends and his girlfriend, who played a pivotal role in maintaining his well-being. This social investment yielded high returns in emotional support, aligning with Social Exchange Theory's principle that valued relationships are worth the time invested. However, negative experiences, such as Respondent 3's exhaustion from acting as a parental figure for her siblings, underscored personal sacrifices that represented a significant emotional cost with little immediate reciprocation.

For aspirations, it varied. Respondent 1 dreamed of owning a business, Respondent 2 aimed to pursue hospitality management inspired by his waiter experience, and Respondent 3, initially without ambitions, now aspired to attend college. These aspirations represent the long-term benefits that justified the short-term costs of their current struggles. Productivity strategies included early preparation (Respondent 2), sufficient rest (Respondent 1), and a disciplined mindset (Respondent 3). Health maintenance involved taking vitamins (Respondents 2 and 3), while Respondent 3 also sought spiritual solace, frequently surrendering her burdens to God. This spiritual coping can be interpreted within Social Exchange Theory as seeking a non-material exchange where faith is offered in return for strength and peace.

This theme is consistent with the findings of Romano & Abadiano (2021) and Mutya et al. (2022), which suggest that coping mechanisms, such as disciplined routines and spiritual resilience, are effective in fostering agency in the face of adversity.

Table 3
The Role and Variation of Family Support Systems

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Family Support	Instrumental as a source of emotional and practical support, though its presence and nature vary significantly, directly impacting the student's ability to cope.	"My mother is always there to support and help me." (Respondent 1) "I don't have my parents... I have my aunt and my older sister... they give me advice." (Respondent 3)

Family support was instrumental yet varied due to differing circumstances, acting as a primary source of "benefits" within the Social Exchange framework, where emotional and practical support is exchanged for the respondent's academic efforts and future success. Respondent 1 relied on his mother for practical and emotional support, while Respondent 2's parents provided guidance to persist with studies despite financial constraints.

In contrast, Respondent 3, orphaned and with an incarcerated father, lacked parental support, relying on an aunt and older sister for advice. This disparity highlights a critical inequity in the social resources available to the respondents, directly impacting their perceived costs and stresses. Parental expectations centered on educational attainment, with Respondent 1's parents envisioning a stable job post-graduation and Respondent 2's mother emphasizing the long-term benefits of a degree. These expectations can be seen as the family's investment, for which the student's diploma is the anticipated return.

Coping with difficulties often involved family, as Respondent 1 sought his mother's help, while Respondent 3 resisted external suggestions to place her siblings in social services, prioritizing family unity. For Respondent 3, the cost of losing family autonomy was deemed higher than the benefit of reduced burden, a profound calculation rooted in Social Exchange Theory. This theme supports the finding of Regis (2019) that robust family structures serve as critical buffers against adversity, though disparities in parental support significantly influence coping outcomes. Family and peer support were crucial buffers against these stressors, providing emotional encouragement and practical help, resonating with Garbe et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of familial involvement during remote learning and crisis periods.

Table 4
Perceptions on the Value of Education and Academic Prioritization

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Study Priorities	A strong recognition of the long-term value of education, leading to strategies that prioritize academic commitments despite immediate financial pressures.	<i>"You should prioritize your studies... for you to have a better job." (Respondent 1)</i> <i>"Work is always available, especially if you have a degree." (Respondent 2)</i>

The importance of education was a recurring theme, with respondents recognizing its long-term value despite immediate challenges. This represents a core Social Exchange Theory calculation, which is enduring the high costs of current struggle for the future benefit of enhanced career capital and socioeconomic mobility. Respondent 1 advocated prioritizing studies to secure better job prospects, while Respondent 2 emphasized that "work is always available, especially if you have a degree," a statement that captures the perceived long-term

payoff of their educational investment. Respondent 3 aimed to apply her grade 12 education to improve her employment opportunities, despite forgoing college due to financial constraints.

Financial burdens, such as funding school projects (Respondent 1) or covering expenses (Respondent 2), necessitated work to sustain studies. Here, the exchange is immediate, which is the current work (cost of time/energy) is traded for the ability to continue their education (benefit of continued investment). Strategies included completing assignments during free time (Respondent 2) and prioritizing rest to maintain academic focus (Respondent 1). This theme is in line with the study of Watanabe (2005) and Frigillano et al. (2015), which emphasize strategic educational prioritization.

Table 5

Motivations, Skill Development, and Challenges of Employment

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Work Demands	Employment is a necessity that provides skill development and a sense of identity, but also imposes physical and mental burdens that can conflict with academic focus.	"I gained experience on how to find a job and... be a better employee." (Respondent 1) "There was a time when only two of us were working... it was hard." (Respondent 2)

Work demands highlighted the necessity and impact of employment. From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, the workplace is a distinct exchange environment where time and labor are traded for wages, skills, and a sense of identity. Respondents worked to meet personal and family needs: Respondent 1 sought independence from parental allowances, Respondent 2 supported his family due to his father's retirement, and Respondent 3 worked to survive and provide for her siblings. Work experiences contributed to skill development, with Respondent 1 gaining job-readiness, Respondent 2 enhancing social skills as a waiter, and Respondent 3 learning practical skills like administering medicine to her siblings. These acquired skills are a non-monetary benefit that increases the overall value of the work exchange.

Challenges included workplace pressures, such as Respondent 1 declining shifts due to exhaustion and Respondent 2 facing a staffing shortage that tested his commitment to studies. These situations represent points where the costs of the work exchange (fatigue, conflict with studies) risk outweighing the benefits. Respondent 3 struggled with daily routines, balancing work with household responsibilities. Respondents valued performing tasks correctly, with Respondent 2 learning from mistakes and Respondent 3 emphasizing communication with superiors. This adherence to professionalism can be seen as an investment to maintain a positive standing in the work-exchange relationship and secure ongoing benefits. This theme is consistent with the research conducted by Burgos et al. (2020) and Chantrea et al. (2017),

which concluded that employment enhances job-readiness and social skills, but it also entails physical and mental burdens that compromise academic focus.

Table 6
The Supportive and Burdensome Roles of Peer Relationships

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Peer Influence	Peers provide emotional support and social connection, but relationships can also present burdens, such as financial pressures or distractions.	"My friends... if they have an extra job, they offer it to me." (Respondent 1) "Some of my older friends... they borrow money from me and it adds to my problems." (Respondent 3)

Peers played a supportive yet limited role. Social Exchange Theory frames peer relationships as networks of mutual exchange, providing emotional support, opportunities, and a sense of belonging, which can offset the social costs of being a working student. Respondent 1 benefited from friends offering extra job opportunities and emotional support through shared social activities. This demonstrates a direct exchange where social capital is converted into practical and emotional benefits. Respondent 2's peers indirectly influenced his decision to work to buy a new phone, prompting employment.

The desire to maintain social parity (owning a phone) became a driver for entering the labor exchange. Respondent 3 faced challenges, such as lending money to older friends, which added to her burdens, illustrating a negative social exchange where her limited financial resources were depleted without reciprocation, though school friends provided emotional encouragement. Regis (2019) concluded that the challenges of establishing interpersonal relationships are consistent with this theme.

Table 7
Financial Pressures as the Primary Driver for Employment

Theme	Description of Core Narrative	Illustrative Respondent Quotes
Financial Challenges	The primary motivator for employment, driven by the need to support personal, familial, and educational expenses, often under conditions of acute financial strain.	"I work to survive and to provide for my siblings." (Respondent 3) "I worked to buy a new phone... it is essential for my schoolworks." (Respondent 2)

Financial difficulties were a primary motivator for working, aligning with prior research (Frigillano et al., 2015; Romano & Abadiano, 2021). This is the most straightforward application of Social Exchange Theory, where labor is explicitly exchanged for the monetary resources necessary for survival and educational participation. Respondent 1 worked to supplement sufficient parental allowances for personal purchases, while Respondent 2 addressed family and school needs due to limited income.

Respondent 3 faced acute financial strain, prioritizing earnings to support her siblings and school expenses. For her, the work-income exchange was not about discretionary spending but about meeting fundamental needs, raising the stakes of the exchange significantly. Earnings were utilized practically as Respondent 1 contributed to household needs, and Respondent 3 balanced school and sibling support. This allocation of financial benefits shows a cascading exchange, where wages are immediately reinvested into the family and educational systems. Alternative financial sources were limited, with Respondent 1 relying on parental support and Respondent 2 facing barriers to government assistance. The lack of alternative exchanges (e.g., from government support systems) forced a reliance on the work-income exchange as their primary, and often only, viable option.

Discussions

The study examined the struggles of working with graduating Tanza National Comprehensive High School students. It highlighted students' personal stories and experiences, which significantly affected their lives, specifically in the areas of work-study balance, personal life, family, study, work, peers, and finances. It revealed the challenges the respondents experienced, the need to balance all areas in their lives, specifically how they juggle work and study, and how they resolved and handled the complicated situations of their lives, which not all students experience daily.

It also revealed how Social Exchange Theory played a role in the respondents' lives, enabling them to manage their limited resources to continue their educational pursuits effectively. Additionally, they drew upon support from their social networks, including family, peers, friends, teachers, and colleagues, who provided emotional, financial, and other forms of assistance, thereby aiding their ability to balance work and study. At the same time, they were able to provide financial support for their family and themselves. On the contrary, it can reduce their time spent with their social networks, specifically with their family members, due to time constraints, and they could lose their social connections.

The findings above are real testaments of the struggles of graduating working students and how their experiences and conditions affected their standing in life, and how it may be able to shape their future. Despite the struggles of working while studying, still, there are positive outcomes that can provide a ray of hope for them and for those who have experienced and may experience the same situations.

The study's outcomes reveal that managing work alongside academic endeavors offers both hurdles and opportunities for the respondents. The significance of balancing work and study was notably mentioned, with respondents stressing the importance of efficient time allocation and commitment prioritization. Their choice to engage in employment while pursuing their studies was driven by several motives, including the wish to generate income, support themselves or their families, and acquire valuable skills and experiences.

Respondents noted the challenges they encountered, including fatigue, pressure, and the need to juggle a number of obligations. They used a variety of techniques to deal with these difficulties, such as asking for help from family and friends, using time management techniques, and establishing personal discipline. Others considered the experience to be uplifting, developing independence and self-discipline, while some respondents had detrimental consequences on their academic performance or approach toward learning.

Respondents discussed their goals, objectives, and factors that shaped their decisions in the personal domain. They stressed the value of sustaining physical and social well-being through adequate sleep, productive routines, and support networks. It also emphasized the need to have faith in God, particularly during difficult and trying times.

Family life surfaced as a significant aspect of the respondents' lives. Others encountered difficulties as a result of their family's circumstances, while some received assistance and direction from their parents. Along with the coping techniques used by respondents to get over challenges, the goals and expectations of parents for their children's education were also addressed.

In the study, respondents acknowledged the significance of education and the necessity of harmonizing their work with their academic responsibilities. They thought that putting schooling first would result in greater employment prospects down the road. They acknowledged the value of applying what they learned in school to their employment.

The results show that working while studying is a complicated and diversified experience. To successfully juggle the pressures of employment and school, one needs to use rigorous time management, fortitude on their own, and support networks. Despite the potential difficulties, the respondents acknowledged the possibility of personal development, independence, and better prospects.

Recommendations

This study on the experiences of graduating working students at Tanza National Comprehensive High School offers actionable insights for supporting their work-study balance. To address the identified challenges, educational institutions should develop tailored support programs, including flexible scheduling, personalized counseling, and academic advising, to help students manage time, stress, and financial pressure effectively.

The findings highlight the urgent need for targeted institutional and policy measures to support working students' academic success and well-being during and beyond crisis periods. Additionally, schools should strengthen the homeroom and career guidance programs to equip students with practical coping strategies for balancing responsibilities while fostering peer support networks. Raising awareness among parents, educators, and community members about these challenges can create a supportive environment conducive to academic success.

On a policy level, the Department of Education should establish clear guidelines to accommodate the growing number of working students in public secondary schools, ensuring inclusive education. Policymakers should also prioritize improving the socioeconomic conditions of low-income households, particularly those impacted by the pandemic, to alleviate financial pressures driving students to work. Furthermore, policies should promote family-oriented support systems, recognizing the pivotal role of family structure in students' success. For future research, longitudinal studies are recommended to explore the long-term effects of work-study balance on academic, mental health, and career outcomes. Comparative analyses across regions, institutions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural contexts could illuminate common and context-specific challenges.

Additionally, investigating the role of coping mechanisms, technology, and workplace experiences in mitigating stress, anxiety, and burnout, as well as their influence on academic and job performance, would enrich the literature. Finally, examining policy implications and the economic impacts of working while studying could advocate for structural changes in educational systems to better support working students.

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