

Behind the Parents Light: A Case Study on the Academic Challenges of Overseas Filipino Workers Children

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed to investigate the personal narratives and academic challenges faced by the left-behind children of Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents. Conducted at Tupaz National High School in Tupaz, Maragusan, Davao de Oro, the research employed a qualitative multiple case study approach to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of five purposively selected students, each with unique family and personal circumstances. The participants included: (a) a shy learner living with her father, grandmother, and brother, with her mother working abroad; (b) a struggling learner residing with his father, grandmother, and sister, also with a mother overseas; (c) a stubborn learner under the care of his aunt while his mother works abroad; (d) a sports-oriented learner living with grandparents and extended relatives, whose single mother is an OFW; and (e) an academically accomplished student from a broken family, also living with grandparents while his mother works overseas. The study revealed several shared academic and emotional challenges, including financial difficulties, a lack of academic guidance at home, and feelings of sadness and loneliness, particularly during special occasions. Despite these obstacles, the participants demonstrated resilience by engaging in coping mechanisms such as sports, peer interaction, mobile phone use, watching television, and attending social events. Significantly, all participants maintained a strong commitment to their education, articulated clear aspirations for the future, and expressed a heartfelt desire to eventually support their families so their mothers would no longer need to work abroad. These findings underscore the importance of targeted support systems for left-behind children and highlight their capacity for perseverance amid adversity.

KEYWORDS: educational management, left-behind children of overseas Filipino workers, academic challenges, educational aspirations, coping mechanisms, qualitative multiple case study

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The absence of one or both parents due to overseas employment poses emotional, social, and academic challenges for students left behind. These students often struggle with low motivation, poor study habits, and behavioral issues such as loneliness and lack of discipline. Despite the financial benefits of remittances, the lack of daily parental supervision and emotional support contributes to fluctuating academic performance and poor engagement in school activities. Care from extended family members may help to some extent, but often lacks the consistency and encouragement needed to support students fully.

At Tupaz National High School, about 10% of the student population has OFW parents, and many of them face the challenges mentioned above. This situation prompted the researcher to investigate the experiences of these students to better understand their struggles. The findings aim to help schools, parents, and policymakers develop strategies to support these learners, such as creating support programs, strengthening guardian involvement, and tailoring academic interventions to address their specific needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this multiple case study was to examine the impact of parental absence due to overseas employment on the academic life of left-behind adolescents within the Filipino context. Specifically, this study investigated the academic challenges faced by students with parents working as OFW by analyzing their lived experiences at Tupaz National High School in Tupas, Maragusan, Davao de Oro. It aimed to explore not only the academic difficulties these students encounter but also their

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personal aspirations, hopes for the future, and the coping mechanisms they develop to navigate the challenges brought about by the absence of parental guidance and support. Through this investigation, the study sought to shed light on the unique struggles and resilience of left-behind children, providing a basis for recommendations to support their academic and emotional well-being.

Research Questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of students with overseas Filipino worker parents?
2. What academic challenges encountered among students with overseas Filipino workers parents?
3. How do learners cope the academic challenges encountered with this parental absence situation?
4. What are the aspirations and hopes of the students behind their parents' light?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Overseas Filipino Workers Life and Struggles

Overseas employment remains a significant socio-economic phenomenon in the Philippines, with millions of Filipinos seeking employment overseas. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2024), there were approximately 2.16 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) between April and September 2023, marking a 9.8% increase from the previous year. This reflects the continued reliance on overseas employment as a means of economic survival. Battistella & Asis (2011) argue that the principal motivations for working abroad are the lack of decent-paying jobs in the country, the desire to improve family living standards, and to secure better educational opportunities for children. These findings are echoed by Orbeta and Abrigo (2019), who found that financial gain, employment stability, and future security were top reasons for migration among Filipino households, with about 12% of Filipino households reporting at least one member who is a current or former OFW. Moreover, Go (2020) notes that systemic issues such as underemployment, contractualization, and limited career mobility in the local labor market push many skilled and unskilled workers to pursue jobs abroad. This complex interplay of economic, social, and institutional factors continues to shape migration patterns in the Philippines.

Experiences of students with OFW parents

Lived experiences are subjective experiences of individuals based on their unique perspectives and interpretations of events, situations, and phenomena they have encountered. In the context of pupils having parents working abroad, lived experiences may refer to the unique experiences, challenges, and opportunities that these pupils face due to their parent's absence. Save the Children (2006) stated that the children left behind in real areas did better in school, but emotionally, they felt lonelier and sad owing to the departure of one or both parents.

Moreover, in the study of Aquino (2019), she explains that children of OFWs are frequently deprived of attention and guidance from their parents, who yearn to provide the care they are unable to due to working away from home to provide their basic needs. Therefore, as children start to study, parents must help guide, teach, and lead their children. It is the responsibility of parents to care for their children; it is challenging for students to have someone to guide them, particularly in their studies. Additionally, space volatile as adolescence may seem, guidance from parents is of primary importance at this time. Children who are left without guidance may resort to deviance and which becomes evident in their academics, social circles and interpersonal relationships. It is deemed that parenting helps shape prosocial behavior or antisocial behavior by meeting or failing to meet the child's basic needs (Delima, 2020).

Children left behind by OFW parents often encounter emotional challenges at home due to parental absence. Capol et al. (2023) conducted a phenomenological study revealing that these children experience feelings of sadness, longing, and emotional struggle. Despite these challenges, they develop coping mechanisms such as seeking support from guardians and peers, and engaging in activities that promote well-being. Similarly, Rendeza (2017) found that left-behind adolescents, regardless of whether one or both parents are abroad, maintain good academic performance. However, they often feel a deep sense of longing for their parents' physical presence, leading to a cycle of emotional adjustment each time their parents leave or return.

Academic Performance of Left-Behind Children

Canosa, et al. 2019 conducted a study at Sto. Tomas North Central School revealed that 64% of pupils with OFW parents achieved a "satisfactory" academic rating and it was further emphasized that active parental involvement, even from abroad, positively impacts students' cognitive development and emotional adjustment. Additionally, the educational impact of parental absence due overseas employment on left behind children is nuanced. Research by Pajaron (2018) revealed that left-behind children are less likely to have poor grades and more likely to study regularly than children of non-migrant parents. This suggests that remittances may enhance educational opportunities by providing better resources and support.

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Positive Impacts on Academic Performance

The academic performance of left-behind children of OFWs is influenced by both supportive and adverse factors. While financial support and increased responsibility can improve academic outcomes, emotional strain and lack of parental guidance may hinder success. Asis and Ruiz-Marave (2015) found that remittances from OFW parents often enhance the educational opportunities of left-behind children. In their study on young children in the Philippines, they observed that in households where the father worked abroad and the mother served as the primary caregiver, children generally fared well academically. This was attributed to better financial stability that allowed access to quality education, school supplies, and extracurricular learning.

Negative Impacts on Academic Performance

According to a study published by RSIS International (2023), children left behind by parents working overseas often experience emotional strain, such as anxiety, sadness, and abandonment. These emotional challenges negatively affect concentration, classroom participation, and motivation, leading to lower academic performance in many cases. Additionally, Repalam, et al (2021) observed that while OFW parents tried to stay in touch through communication technology, children were often left unsupervised in their studies. The lack of consistent monitoring and help with schoolwork from parents contributed to poor study habits, missed assignments, and lower performance among many left behind children. Moreover, Wen and Lin (2018) found that among left-behind children in rural China, girls often suffered more significantly in terms of academic outcomes due to greater emotional distress. The early separation from parents had a measurable impact on academic performance, particularly when emotional support was not replaced by a reliable caregiver.

Struggles of Students Left Behind by OFW Parents

Students with OFW parents face multiple challenges beyond emotional struggles. Astilla et al. (2024) highlighted the financial and psychological impacts of parental absence on left-behind children. The study found that these students had to take on additional responsibilities, such as managing household expenses, due to delays or decreases in remittances. Despite these challenges, many demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Further study conducted by Gonzales et al. (2019) indicated that adolescents with OFW parents exhibited higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to those with non-migrant parents. The absence of parental support during critical developmental stages can exacerbate these mental health issues.

Similarly, Dominguez & Hall (2022) examined the health outcomes of left-behind children in the Philippines due to parental migration. The study found that these children experience a range of poor physical and mental health outcomes, including behavioral and emotional issues. The absence of parents often leads to increased responsibilities for the children, contributing to stress and affecting their overall well-being. Moreover, Wen & Lin (2018) study revealed that left-behind children had lower life satisfaction and academic achievement than their peers. The absence of parental care was identified as a contributing factor to these outcomes, highlighting the psychological impact of parental absence due overseas employment.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study involved five purposefully selected students aged 13 to 18 from Tupaz National High School during the academic year 2024–2025, all identified as left-behind children of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Using a qualitative case study design, the researcher explored each participant's unique academic and emotional experiences, categorizing them into distinct learner profiles: the shy type, the struggling learner, the stubborn, the sports-minded, and the achiever. These cases revealed a range of coping mechanisms and challenges shaped by the absence of their OFW parent(s), from low self-esteem and academic struggles to behavioral issues and high-achieving yet emotionally burdened students. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants could effectively articulate their experiences, with ethical considerations such as informed consent and the right to withdraw strictly observed throughout the research process.

Procedure

The researcher followed a systematic procedure in gathering data for the study. First, an endorsement letter was secured from the Dean of the Graduate School, and consent was obtained from both the participants and their guardians, with assurance of confidentiality and voluntary participation. In-depth interviews were then conducted on the agreed schedule using validated interview guide questions, and conversations were recorded with an audio device. The recorded interviews were transcribed carefully, as this step was crucial for data analysis. The transcriptions were then reviewed and analyzed with the guidance of the research adviser and analyst to identify emerging themes relevant to the study.

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Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a concurrent, multi-step process grounded in qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2009). First, interview recordings were transcribed and organized into a tabular format; verbatim responses alongside corrected grammar to facilitate systematic review. Next, the researcher applied a hierarchical coding system (Moral et al., 2015), extracting key ideas and grouping them into categories. Through thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), these coded segments were examined for patterns and relationships, enabling the researcher to distill core themes. Finally, the interpreted themes were synthesized into empirically grounded findings, which informed the study's conclusions, pedagogical implications, and recommendations for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Emotional Strain Due to Parental Absence

All participants expressed feelings of sadness, loneliness, and longing due to the absence of their OFW parents. These emotional struggles often translated into reduced concentration and lack of motivation in school. Participants also noted that special occasions like birthdays and recognition days intensified their emotional distress, impacting their academic performance.

Theme 2: Lack of Supervision and Academic Discipline

Participants revealed that the absence of immediate parental supervision often led to procrastination, missed assignments, and poor study habits. While guardians were present, they often lacked the authority or educational capacity to provide academic guidance. Some participants reported skipping tasks or engaging in non-academic distractions due to the lack of direct parental monitoring.

Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite the challenges, students adopted various coping strategies such as self-motivation, peer support, involvement in school activities, and maintaining communication with their OFW parents through digital platforms. Teachers and guidance counselors also played vital roles in providing encouragement and advice.

Theme 4: Aspirations Behind the Sacrifice

A recurring sentiment was that participants viewed their parents' sacrifices as a source of strength. They were driven by the desire to "give back" by excelling in school and eventually lifting their families out of poverty. This sense of purpose became a motivating factor that helped them endure emotional difficulties.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this case study highlight that while OFW remittances may provide material stability, the emotional and academic implications for the left-behind children are profound and multifaceted. The absence of parental support can significantly hinder students' academic performance, discipline, and emotional health. However, with strong internal motivation, external support systems, and coping mechanisms, students demonstrate resilience in the face of these challenges.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Guidance and Counseling Programs in schools to address emotional and academic needs of OFW children.
Develop Home-School Partnership Programs that involve guardians and teachers in active monitoring and encouragement.
Establish Peer Support Groups within schools where students with similar experiences can share and learn coping strategies.
Encourage Regular Communication between OFW parents and their children through accessible technology.
Conduct Further Studies with larger sample sizes and multiple schools to enhance the generalizability of findings.

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